The influence of father involvement on child welfare permanency outcomes: A secondary data analysis

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Abstract:

Children have a higher risk for poor psychosocial outcomes when their fathers are absent or uninvolved. These children are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, and engage in risky behaviors like using alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. Only 54% of nearly a half million children in foster care had contact with their fathers in the past year compared to 72% of children from the general population. Data on the involvement of fathers whose children are in out-of-home placements are scarce and child welfare agency efforts to involve fathers and children's permanency outcomes also are not well documented.

This present study entails a secondary data analysis of 60 foster care case records to assess the influence of father involvement on children's permanency outcomes. The findings indicate that when fathers are involved their children have shorter lengths of stay in foster care and they are more likely to be reunited with birth parents or placed with relatives after foster care than in non-relative placements. This study contributes to the emerging research on father involvement and explores agency practices that might account for long-term and non-relative out-of-home placements. Implications for child welfare practice, policy, and research are discussed.

Keywords: Father involvement | Father engagement | Child welfare barriers

Article:

1. Introduction

1.1. Significance of the problem

One of the most critical societal problems that the child welfare system faces is the large number of fathers who are absent from their children's lives. According to the United States Census Bureau, approximately 21 million children (30%) are currently living without their biological fathers (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). For Hispanic/Latino and African American children, these figures are 41% and 66%, respectively (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Children have a higher risk of poor psychosocial outcomes when their fathers are absent or uninvolved in their lives (Flouri, 2005); for example, these children are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, and engage in risky behaviors such as the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs (Nock and Einolf, 2008 and Rosenberg and Wilcox, 2006). Additionally, these children are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system and are more likely to be incarcerated later in life (Flouri, Nock, & Einolf, 2008).

Many children living in out-of-home placements are used to having no contact with their biological fathers. For example, Malm (2003) reported that only 54% of the nearly half a million children in foster care had contact with their fathers in the span of a year, whereas the corresponding figure is 72% in the general population. Data on the involvement of fathers whose children are in out-of-home placements are scarce, and the efforts of child welfare agencies to involve fathers are also not well documented. The same is true of the children's permanency outcomes. This issue is of the utmost concern because if fathers are not full participants in the permanency planning process, then the child welfare system deems them to be noncompliant (O'Donnell, 1999), uninterested in their children's lives (Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008), or unsuitable as a permanent placement option (Malm et al., 2008), which jeopardizes their parental right to nurture and guide their children throughout their lives and preserve their family heritage.

1.2. Father involvement defined

In our society, those who assume the role of father or undertake paternal responsibilities may or may not have a biological connection to the children in question (Palkovitz, 2002). Although fathers are legally recognized as either biological or adoptive, social workers understand that other related and unrelated males can make a positive impact on children's lives (Bellamy, 2009 and Richardson, 2009). When a child is in foster care, father involvement is typically identified as involving specific contributions such as visitation with their children and financial or nonfinancial support for their children (Malm et al., 2008). These actions are required for fathers to meet child welfare agency expectations and indicate their readiness to promote their children's development and overall well-being while parenting them in safe, stable, and permanent families (Cryer and Washington, 2011 and Malm et al., 2008).

1.3. Theoretical foundation of father involvement

This paper is not intended to test a specific theory. However, family systems theory is suggested as a basis for understanding father involvement in the context described above. Father involvement is an integral part of an interdependent family system, which is strongly affected by emotional issues and conflicts as family members interact with one another and with their environment (Bowen, 1978). When the father is not involved, the system has to adjust — likely with consequences. When the father is absent and then returns to a family that is not intact, a different adjustment must occur. Child welfare agency services and supports can assist in crucial turning points in families' healthy adjustment.

1.4. Case planning

Social workers at child welfare agencies work with parents to develop case plans that address the reasons their children entered foster care and stipulate goals that must be accomplished by the parents within a 12-month time frame to rectify those issues and ensure that their children can be reunited or placed with them (NCDHHS, 2009). For fathers whose children are in foster care, such a case plan typically includes requirements such as attending agency meetings, attending parenting classes, maintaining employment, obtaining adequate family housing, addressing alcohol and substance abuse issues, making child support payments, and staying connected with their children through supervised or unsupervised visitation. A father's personal progress and compliance with his case plan will influence the placement decision that will be made by the permanency planning team and enforced by the court. Therefore, child welfare workers face enormous challenges as they seek to ensure that fathers are included in case planning at the onset of any child welfare crisis (O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005).

2. Literature review

2.1. Barriers to involvement

2.1.1. Child welfare agency barriers

There is a dearth of studies on fathers' involvement with child welfare agencies. The few relevant studies will be discussed in some depth to illustrate the scope of the child welfare agency barriers that can affect fathers' progress and case plan compliance. In a study of agency efforts to engage fathers, O'Donnell (1999) interviewed caseworkers to inquire approximately 74 African American fathers who had a total of 100 children placed in kinship caregivers' homes. He found that child welfare agencies were not setup to include fathers properly during the intake, assessment, and case planning phases. Furthermore, caseworkers did not regularly see the fathers in person or make follow-up telephone calls to them. In a different study, O'Donnell (2001) found that the majority (70%) of the fathers from the 132 single and multiple father households studied had never participated in case planning activities and that 67% had never talked with the social workers about obtaining custody of their children.

Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, and Dominelli (2009) examined 116 child welfare case records that revealed a general lack of contact between social workers and fathers. Nearly 50% of fathers were perceived by social workers as irrelevant to their children and the children's mothers; 60% of fathers were not contacted by caseworkers because they were seen as a risk to their children (Brown et al.). In the few instances in which contact between the social workers and fathers did occur, the fathers were seen as an asset to the children.

Similar issues were reported by Malm, Murray, and Geen (2006) based on a survey of 53 child welfare administrators and 1222 caseworkers that indicated their preparedness to work with nonresident fathers of children in foster care in four different states. Overall, 70% of caseworkers had some degree of training on how to identify, locate, or engage fathers. However, less than a third (32%) reported receiving training on how to refer cases to child support enforcement to obtain assistance with locating the fathers. Caseworkers who did receive father engagement training were significantly more likely to share the case plans with the fathers, were significantly more likely to consider the fathers as possible placements for the children, and were significantly more likely to work with fathers who expressed interest in having their children live with them.

In a follow-up to their 2006 study, Malm et al. (2008) examined case outcomes for three groups: unknown fathers (n = 237), fathers who were identified in the case record but who were not contacted by the social worker (n = 590), and fathers who were both identified and contacted (n = 1071). Among the closed and open cases, significant differences were found in terms of lengths of stay between the cases with involved fathers (i.e., provided one or two of the following: financial support, nonfinancial support, or visited their children) and the cases with highly involved fathers (i.e., provided financial and nonfinancial support and visited their children). Children whose nonresident fathers were identified and contacted by the child welfare agency had slightly shorter lengths of stay (29.4 months) than the children whose nonresident fathers were unknown (31.1 months) or those whose nonresident fathers had been identified but not contacted (30.8 months). However, the results were not statistically significant ($p > .05$). The findings also indicated that children had shorter stays in foster care when their fathers were highly involved (26.2 months vs. 30.6 months, $p < .01$). Such involvement included providing financial support and participating in visitation.

Coakley (2008) presented findings obtained from a secondary analysis of foster care placement data of 88 African American and Hispanic/Latino children for whom she investigated length of stay and case plan compliance by the children's fathers. The analysis identified 60 biological fathers and males who assumed the father role. Of those, approximately 61% did not comply with the case plan, 21% was in compliance, and approximately 18% were missing or their status was unknown. Children whose fathers complied with their case plans had significantly shorter stays in foster care than did the children whose fathers did not comply (21.8 months vs. 35.1 months).

Bellamy's (2009) findings based on an analysis of 3978 families from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being data indicated that children who lived with their birth fathers, stepfathers, or adoptive fathers or did not live with an adult male were less likely to be placed in out-of-home care than were children who lived with a nonparental adult male. In addition, children who had had contact with a noncustodial parent in the previous year were 46% less likely to enter out-of-home care (Bellamy, 2009).

2.1.2. Other barriers

There are some barriers to father involvement that can be attributed to the fathers' own problematic behaviors and others that are considered to be beyond their control. Sometimes, these barriers coexist. For instance, many fathers struggle with illicit substance and alcohol use (National Council on Child Abuse Prevention & Family Violence (NCCAFV), 2012; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2012) and mental health issues (Barth, 2009, Darlington et al., 2005 and Huntsman, 2008) which can lead to children needing out-of-home placements. The need for long-term treatment for these issues can become an added barrier to fathers' future contact with their children because it may conflict with the time frames mandated in the case plan (Rockhill et al., 2008 and Ryan et al., 2006).

Mothers may inhibit father involvement by denying or limiting access to their children. For instance, mothers may not assist social workers with identifying fathers or their whereabouts. Furthermore, when the romantic relationship between the parents has ended, mothers might not be supportive of father–child relationships because of their disappointment regarding the amount of financial support the fathers pay (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Mothers may also disapprove of the fathers' parenting principles or of perceived inappropriate behavior that might threaten the safety of their children or their continuity of care (Allen and Hawkins, 1999 and Fagan and Barnett, 2003). Such fears on the part of mothers may or may not be warranted.

There are also underlying societal problems related to poverty, racism and oppression that should be taken into account if we wish to understand reasons why fathers are not involved (Harris & Marmer, 1996). For instance, African American and Hispanic and Latino fathers are more likely to experience poor education, poor health, substandard housing, incarceration, unemployment, and low income (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2012). Any of those problems, to which men from racial and ethnic minority groups are more vulnerable, can adversely affect their ability to function competently as parents, which can rule them out as a possible placement option or positive influence for their children.

3. Study objective

Based on the relevant literature, it seems likely that permanency outcomes for children can be improved by enhancing child welfare agencies' efforts to engage fathers and encourage them to stay involved. The objective of the present study was to examine the influence of father involvement on children's permanency outcomes in a large public child welfare agency in the

southeastern region of the U.S. Two main hypotheses were examined: (a) children will have shorter stays in foster care when their fathers comply with the case plans than with children whose fathers do not comply and (b) children who are in foster care will be reunited or placed with their relatives rather than with nonrelatives when their fathers comply with the case plans.

4. Methodology

4.1. Design and sample

The present study, a secondary data analysis that was conducted between January 2008 and December 2008, was approved by the author's University Institutional Review Board.

The sample consisted of 60 foster care case records for father–child dyads from a large County Department of Social Services in the southeast region of the United States. An online program called randomizer.org (Urbaniak & Plous, 2008) was used to randomly select case identification numbers of children from a sample of 1418 case records that were identified as being closed between January 1, 2003 and January 1, 2008. The siblings of the children selected were not studied to avoid over-inflating the results by potentially considering children with the same father.

4.2. Data collection

Data were collected from the case records and the agency database files for the selected cases. A data collection tool that was developed by the researcher was used to record the extent of the fathers' involvement at various times during their children's time in foster care. No identifiable information about the individuals studied was included in the study. Non-identifying identification numbers were assigned to each record to keep the identities of the children and their families confidential.

4.3. Variables

The following variables were used to study the influence of father involvement on children's permanency outcomes. Case plan compliance and case plan status were used to test the hypotheses.

4.3.1. Independent variables

Case plan compliance was used to represent father involvement (Malm et al., 2008). This variable indicates whether a father's involvement in activities that are stipulated in the case plan agreement (i.e., activities related to his child's safety and well-being and the permanence of the relationship) was acceptable to the child welfare agency. Compliance was determined based on the court summaries, which would state that a father completed his goals as outlined in the case plan if that was the case.

Case plan compliance was recorded as either a 0 (noncompliance) or a 1 (compliance). *Noncompliance* was indicated if the court summary indicated that the father did not comply with the case plan because he was either unknown, uninvolved in the case planning, or unable to complete the case plan activities to which he initially agreed. *Compliance* was indicated if the court summary noted that the father had completed the goals assigned to him in the case plan.

Case plan status was recorded using either a 0 (did not sign the case plan) or a 1 (signed the case plan). This variable indicates whether the father provided his signature to indicate that he would participate in the activities that are stipulated in the case plan agreement.

Child's race/ethnicity was measured as a dichotomous variable using the values 1 (minority racial/ethnic backgrounds) and 2 (Caucasian). The category *minority racial/ethnic backgrounds* includes African American, Biracial, and Hispanic/Latino children, all of whom are considered to be overrepresented in the child welfare system in the United States (Hill, 2005). Biracial and Hispanic/Latino children were not analyzed separately because they were minimally represented, with only one and four cases, respectively.

Child's age is a continuous variable. Descriptive statistics for this variable were reported in years and months.

Father's relationship to the child was recorded as a 1 (birth father), 2 (stepfather), 3 (mother's boyfriend), 4 (uncle), 5 (legal guardian), or 6 (unknown). This variable indicates how the male involved in the case is legally related to the children or the role of the adult male who is involved in the case.

4.3.2. Father's race/ethnicity

The information regarding the child's race/ethnicity was used in the analyses instead of the corresponding information for his or her father because the data regarding the fathers were limited. This choice was justified because there were 57 completed responses for the children's race/ethnicity and 40 for their fathers' race/ethnicity. Because there were 20 occurrences in which the fathers' race/ethnicity was not documented in the case record, it cannot be definitively stated that the fathers shared their children's race/ethnicity. However, it is known that there were four cases in which the adult males' race/ethnicity was different than their children's.

Father's residency status was recorded as a 0 (nonresident), 1 (resident), 2 (unknown or does not apply), or 3 (incarcerated). This variable indicates whether the father was living in the home of his child when the child entered foster care. This variable was also recoded as a dichotomous variable so that additional analyses could be conducted to compare the differences between resident and nonresident fathers only.

4.3.3. Dependent variables

The dependent variables, *length of stay in foster care* and *post-foster care placement*, were selected because they coincide with the goal of child welfare agencies: to provide safe, permanent homes for children in their custody. Child welfare agencies aim to prevent children from being brought into custody. However, if it is necessary for children to be placed in foster care, then child welfare agencies strive to reduce the length of time during which children remain in foster care and to ensure that their post-foster-care placements are with their parents or relatives who will keep them safe.

Length of stay in foster care indicates the number of months during which a child was in an out-of-home placement. This variable was calculated by subtracting the date the child entered foster care from the date he or she was discharged from foster care.

Post-foster care placement was recorded using the values 1 (birth parent), 2 (relative), 3 (non-relative), 4 (aged out of foster care), or 5 (other). These data indicate with whom the children were placed (or the reason they were discharged) when they exited the foster care system. The category *aged out* includes youths 18 years old or older who were discharged from the foster care system because they were considered to be capable of living independently without the assistance of the child welfare agency. Under these special circumstances, a youth legally does not have to return to his or her family, but it is expected that father involvement will influence whether it is possible for the youth to return home prior to aging out. The category*other* includes *run-away status* (for when children's whereabouts are unknown) and *emancipation* (for when children are at least 16 years old and the court deems them capable of living on their own). The above five categories were collapsed into two categories, 1 (parent or relative) and 2 (non-relative or other) to increase statistical power.

4.4. Analysis

The data were analyzed using the statistical software package SPSS. Parametric tests were used as long as the data permitted it; otherwise, nonparametric tests were used. Additionally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the combined and independent effects of the predictor variables. For all procedures, the relationships between the variables were tested using conventional social sciences methods (a = .05).

5. Results

5.1. Children's characteristics

Of the 60 children selected from closed case records, 45% were boys, and 55% were girls. In contrast, of the children in the U.S. Child Welfare System in 2009, 53% were boys and 47% were girls (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System AFCARS [AFCARS] Report, 2010.). There were twice as many children of color (66.7%) as Caucasian children (33.3%). The sample included African American children (58.3%), Biracial children (those with a least one African American parent) (1.7%),

Hispanic/Latino children (6.7%), and Caucasian children (33.3%). The corresponding national figures for race/ethnicity are 57% for children of color and 40% for Caucasians (AFCARS, 2010).

The children's ages in the study sample (*N* = 60) ranged from 0 to 18 years, with a mean age of 8.84 (*SD* = 5.55) years. In comparison, the national median is 7.1 years (AFCARS, 2010). The children from this study stayed in foster care for an average of 32.06 months (*N* = 60, *M* = 32.06, *SD* = 38.92), although the length of their stays ranged from 6 days to 17.84 years. The distribution for this variable was significantly skewed (Skewness = 2.90 [SE = .31]) because of two cases at the high end of the range. In comparison, the average stay in foster care for children in this study is markedly higher than the national median (22 months vs. 13.7 months) (AFCARS, 2010).

After foster care, the children in this study were reunited with one or two birth parents (*N* = 55) (36.3%) or were placed with relatives (29.1%) or non-relatives (21.8%). In addition, 12.8% were in other categories; they may have been emancipated, aged out or run away. Table 1 presents a detailed list of these category percentages and the respective mean lengths of stay.

Table 1. Post-foster care placement with length of stay.

Who was child placed with post-foster care?	*N*	%	Length of stay in months	
			Mean	*SD*
Both father and mother	2	3.6	12.70	3.74
Mother	10	18.2	14.96	9.73
Father	6	10.9	7.58	5.94
Father and step-mother	1	1.8	.89	N.A.
Mother and mother's boyfriend	1	1.8	19.06	N.A.
Relative placement	11	20.0	19.45	13.24
Relative adoption	5	9.1	29.10	15.16
Non-relative adoption	7	12.7	56.62	45.26
Non-relative placement	5	9.1	49.31	40.43
Aged out	3	5.5	47.42	34.83
Other	4	7.3	104.26	94.08
Total	55	100	32.76	40.59

Note: Data missing for 5 cases.

In comparison, the United States national statistics show that children were placed with birth parents (51%), relatives (8%), and adoptive parents (20%) (see Table 2). Of those adopted nationally, 32% were adopted by other relatives, 14% were adopted by non-relatives, and 54% were adopted by foster families (AFCARS, 2010). Twenty-one percent of children in the U.S. foster care system fell into the category of “other,” which included emancipation, run-away status, and other types of placements or discharges (AFCARS, 2010).

Table 2. Comparison between study sample and national statistics.

Variable	Study sample (N = 55)	U.S. Child Welfare System
Gender		
Male	45%	53%
Female	55%	47%
Race		
Children of color	66.7%	57%
Caucasian	33.3%	40%
Age (mean)	8.84 years	7.1 years
Placement outcome		
Birth parent(s) (one or two)	36.3%	51%
Relative	29.1%	8%
Adopted		
Relative	N.A.	32%
Non-relative	21.8%	14%
Foster families	N.A.	54%
Other	12.8%	21%
Length of stay in foster care (median)	22 months	13.7 months

Note: The category, “children of color” is composed of African American, Biracial, and Hispanic/Latino children.

Note: U.S. statistics (AFCARS, 2010) corresponds with the same time frame as the study sample statistics.

5.2. Influence of children's factors on permanency

5.2.1. Child's race and length of stay in foster care

The mean number of months during which children from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds stayed in foster care is slightly less than the corresponding figure for Caucasian children [N = 40, M = 31.3 (SD = 39.22)] vs. [N = 20, M = 33.6 (SD = 39.31)]. However, this difference was not statistically significant (p = .84).

5.2.2. Child's age and length of stay in foster care

The age of the children was significantly related to the length of their stay in foster care (N = 60, r = .43,p = .001). Older children tended to stay in foster care longer than younger children.

5.3. Fathers' characteristics

5.3.1. Father's relationship to the child

The sixty adult males named in the case records were the children's birth fathers (88.3%) and stepfathers (3.3%), their mother's boyfriends (1.7%), their uncles (1.7%), or their legal guardians

(1.7%). Other cases did not include any information about the children's fathers or responsible adult males (3.3%); therefore, they were listed as unknown by the present researcher. Additionally, 5% of males who were identified in the case records as the children's birth fathers were deceased. Those case records were included in the analyses because the cases were expected to still contain valuable information about the children's outcomes given the lack of a father figure in their lives.

5.3.2. Father's residency status

In this sample ($N = 60$), there were more non-resident fathers (65%) than resident fathers (30%) when the children entered foster care. The residency status of the remaining fathers is unknown or not applicable (5%). Of all of the fathers studied, 11.7% were incarcerated, thus not living in the home.

5.4. Influence of fathers' factors on permanency

The results showed that there were more non-resident fathers of children from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds than there were nonresident fathers of Caucasian children (39% vs. 14%). There was a significant relationship between race/ethnicity and the fathers' residency status ($N = 57$, $X^2 = 7.00$, $df = 1$,$p = .01$). Specifically, fathers of Caucasian children were more likely to reside with their children when they came into foster care than were fathers of children from other racial or ethnic backgrounds (see Fig. 1). Moreover, children whose fathers resided with them when they were placed in foster care spent less time in foster care than did children whose fathers were non-residents ($N = 18$, $M = 17.35$ [$SD = 13.88$], $N = 39$,$M = 35.60$ [$SD = 43.70$], $t = -2.362$, $df = 50.976$, $p = .02$). The results reflect that equal variances were not assumed. In addition, there were no statistically significant bivariate results for the male's relationship to the child (i.e., whether he was the child's birth father) ($N = 58$), his residency status ($X^2 = 1.85$, $df = 1$, $p = .17$), the child's post-foster-care placement ($X^2 = .155$, $df = 1$, $p = .69$), the father's case plan compliance ($X^2 = .205$, $df = 1$, $p = .65$) or the child's length of stay in foster care ($t = .16$, $df = 8.14$, $p = .87$).

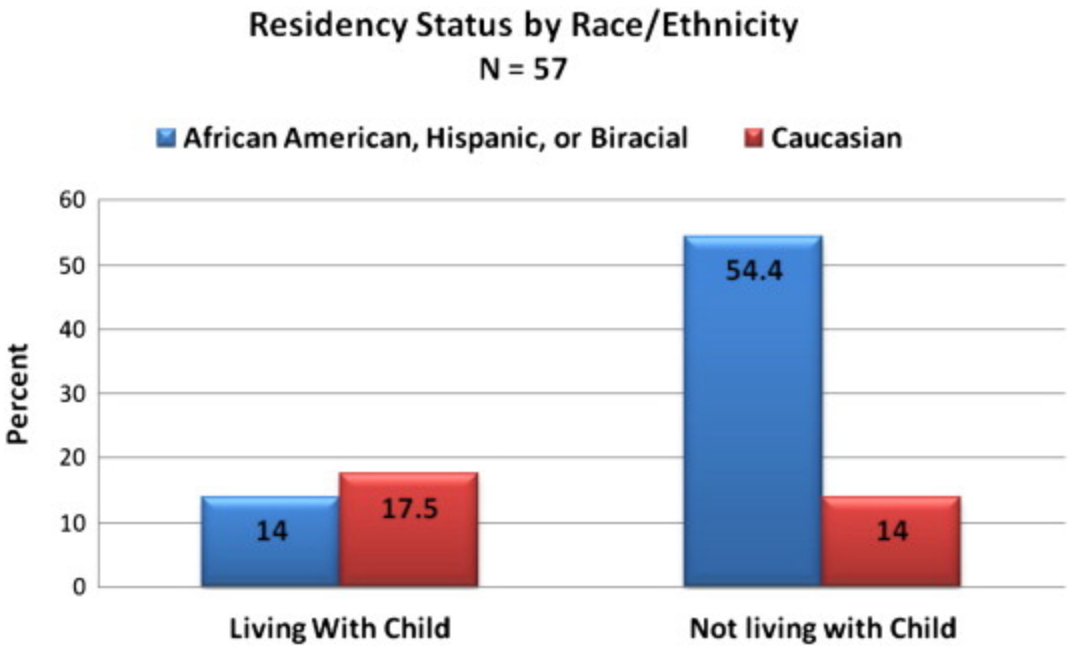

Fig. 1. Residency status by child's race/ethnicity.

5.5. Influence of case plan compliance status

5.5.1. Case barriers

There were several barriers that the child welfare agency listed as having had an impact on children's safety and permanence. These barriers are seen as serious enough for the agency not to continue with its plan to reunify the family or place the child with the birth parent until the issues were addressed and were reported for approximately 74% of the cases in the sample (N = 57) (see Table 3). They included issues with parents' behavior, housing, income, and ability to keep their children safe. However, the data did not specify which parent bore the responsibility for rectifying problems related to parenting. There were other barriers listed that pertained to the child.

Table 3. Barriers for placements.

Type of barriers (N = 57)	%
Parents' barriers	
Problematic parental conduct	33.3
Unacceptable housing	1.8
Inadequate parental income	1.8
Agency could not assure child's safety in the parent's or parents' home	1.8
Children's barriers	
Adoption barriers	17.5
Child's conduct/behavior	8.8
Mental health treatment	5.3

Child's readiness	1.8
Incomplete assessment/evaluation of child	1.8
No barriers	26.3

5.5.2. Case plan signature

The majority of the fathers did not sign the case plans (N = 44, 61.4%) compared to those who did sign (38.6%), as was required for them to agree to complete their case plan goals. Fewer than half (15.9%) of those who signed the case plans actually complied with them by attaining their goals (see Fig. 2). There was a statistically significant association between case plan signatures and compliance (X^2 = 13.22, df = 1,p = .000).

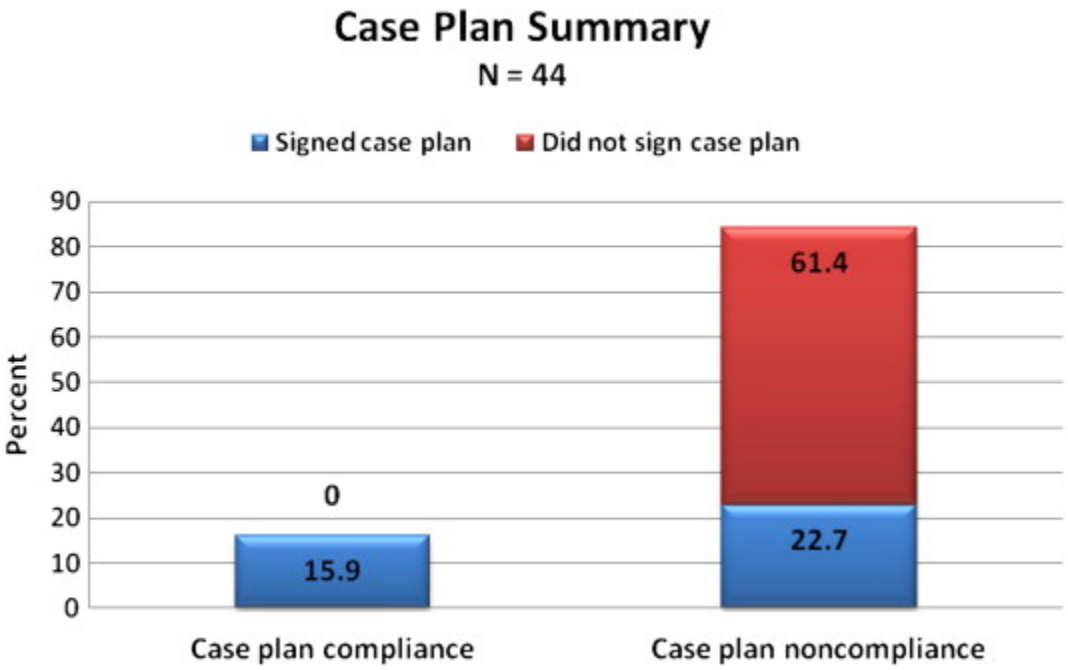

Fig. 2. Case plan summary.

5.5.3. Case plan compliance and length of stay in foster care

Children had shorter lengths of stay in foster care when their fathers complied with the case plan goals than when they did not comply. The children's length of stay in foster care decreased by more than half when their fathers complied. The results are significant (N = 44, U = 55, $N1$ = 11.86, $N2$ = 24.51, p = .015).

5.5.4. Case plan compliance and post-foster care placement

The results of the Fisher's exact test indicated the existence of a significant relationship between fathers' compliance with the case plans and the placement of the children after foster care (N = 43, p = .028). When fathers successfully completed the case plan goals, their children were

more often placed with a parent or relative than they were placed with a non-relative or in another type of placements (see Fig. 3).

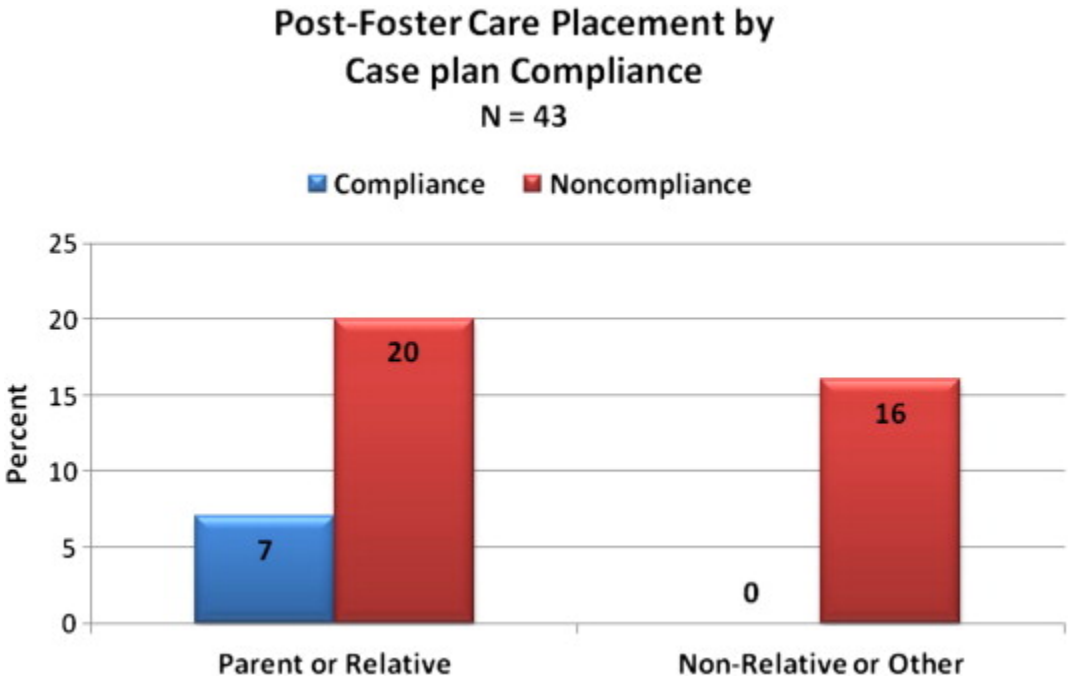

Fig. 3. Post-foster care placement by case pan compliance.

5.6. Multiple regression

Finally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the predictive association between a set of independent variables: the child's race/ethnicity, the male's relationship to the child, the father's residency, the case plan signature, the post-foster-care placement, the dependent variable, and the length of the child's stay in foster care (see Table 4). It is important to rule out spurious relationships between predictors because there is common cause among them, and consider all factors that might lead to a better understanding about children's extended length of stay in care. These variables were included in the model because in practice they are thought to be related to children's permanency. However, there is very little empirical data about their collective influence on children's permanency. The results indicated that in combination, the independent variables had a statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable (N = 41,F = 3.47, df = 5, p = .012). However, this model only indicated the existence of a statistically significant bivariate relationship between post-foster-care placement and length of stay in foster care (t = 3.47,p = .001).

Table 4. Child's length of stay in foster care regressed on predictor variables.

Variable	Length of stay (N = 41)			95% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	*β*	*t*	Lower bound	Upper bound

Child's race/ethnicity	− 16.779	− .178	− 1.104	− 12.148	162.389
Male's relationship to child	6.259	.022	.139	− 47.608	14.049
Father's residency	12.829	− .142	− .626	− 85.125	97.642
Case plan signature	2.775	.032	.161	− 37.836	32.285
Post-foster care placement	47.785	.537	3.469*	− 75.723	− 19.847
R^2 = .325					
$F(5,41)$ = 3.470					
p = .012					

*p < .01, two-tailed.

6. Discussion

6.1. Limitations

This study provides useful information about the association between father involvement in the case plan process and children's permanency outcomes in the United States. However, this study has a number of limitations based on the sample and the data. First, because of agency-related logistical issues, four records from the original list of randomly selected case records were not received; therefore, they were not included in the study. To reduce the chance of bias, the researcher verified that the case record omissions were not systematic or deliberate in any way.

Additionally, upon review, six selected records were discovered to be ineligible for inclusion based on the researcher's established selection criteria that they were to be related to closed cases where only the parents were suspected of abuse or neglect. Furthermore, two cases were omitted because the race/ethnicity categories of the children, Asian (n = 1) and unknown (n = 1), made the cases less representative of the population of children in foster care in the county studied.

The small sample size (N = 60) for this study and the amount of missing data for some variables created a number of issues for data analysis. Data were missing for several of the predictor variables (e.g., *case plan status* [N = 43]) which further reduced the available number of cases that could yield meaningful results. Missing data central to the hypotheses might have affected the study results. The small sample size as a result of excluded missing values by SPSS also influenced the type of analyses that were appropriate to use. For instance, because of this sample's overdispersion, where the dependent variable's variance (1515.39) was much higher than the mean (M = 32.06 [SD = 38.93]), a negative binomial regression would have been appropriate to test the model effects as well as regress the length of stay in care on child and father variables. However, the present author used general linear modeling to model the dependent variable,*children's length of stay in foster care*, as some researchers warn against using negative binomial regression with small sample sizes (UCLA, 2012). Given the limitations of this study, caution should be used when interpreting and generalizing from the findings.

The content and breadth of the information contained in the case records about the fathers were not as robust as they were for the mothers. This is a pervasive issue in the Unites States, where vital information is unknown for many fathers (Brown et al., 2009). O'Donnell et al. (2005) have shown that when fathers are excluded from the case plan process, then they are not likely to agree with the permanency plan or comply with the case plan goals. Further, social workers' failure to engage fathers to evaluate their mental health or substance use issues has adversely affected their ability to understand fathers' parenting strengths, as well as their rehabilitative and developmental needs as they are considered for child placement (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Researchers who conduct future studies on child welfare-involved fathers should anticipate that the case record information will be fractured or missing and therefore should use enhanced methodologies that strengthen their ability to increase their sample size. They can employ a longitudinal design to allow for more opportunities to collect new data on new cases; thus recruit a larger sample. A large sample size will enhance researchers' ability to conduct suitable generalized linear regression analyses, as well as increase their ability to detect statistically significant differences. Secondary data for mothers should also be collected in order to compare mother–father compliance with case plans and their influences on children's outcomes. In addition, researchers can contact the social worker and/or identified parent in the case record to gain additional information about unclear documentation or complete the missing data from the case record.

6.2. Implications of results

6.2.1. Engaging and retaining fathers in case planning

Although an understanding of the efforts of specific child welfare agencies to engage fathers could not be extrapolated from the data collected, the findings generated important knowledge about the relationship between engaged fathers and children's permanency outcomes. There was support for both of the main hypotheses, which indicated that fathers' compliance with case plan goals was positively associated with their children's spending less time in foster care and being placed with their families. These are remarkable discoveries given the problems with long-term and non-relative out-of-home placements, which are well-documented in the child welfare literature (Chipungu and Bent-Goodley, 2004, Hill, 2005, Malm et al., 2008,Pecora et al., 2005 and Ryan et al., 2006). Case plan compliance is critical to addressing those problems, even if it is later determined that the father will not be selected as the primary caregiver. Fathers' compliance with case plans affects social workers' ability to identify and engage paternal family members as possible alternative placements. Researchers have documented the significant, supportive role that non-paternal males, such as uncles or grandfathers, have had in raising child-welfare involved children (Bellamy, 2009 and Richardson, 2009).

Another notable finding from the present study is that fewer than half of the fathers who signed the case plans actually complied with them. This finding is consistent with those of other studies that describe fathers' waning participation during permanency planning activities and

involvement interventions (see Coakley, 2008 and O'Donnell, 1999). The reasons why fathers initially participate and then later quit must be understood and addressed to improve fathers' retention during their children's stay in foster care. Additionally, child welfare agencies should explore whether ancillary support services provided to fathers could be most beneficial if made available as soon as the family has contact with the child welfare agency, while the family is still interested in keeping the children out of the foster care system and while the family is hopeful that it will have a useful role in the children's permanency plans. These support services should concentrate on keeping fathers motivated to stay involved through frequent helpful contact and on helping them to better understand and navigate the child welfare and court systems, which can oftentimes be intimidating and difficult to work with.

Additionally, it was found that collectively, certain factors related to the fathers themselves also made it easier to predict how long their children would stay in foster care. However, except for the post-foster-care placement variable, the variables' individual predictive value was low with regard to the length of stay outcome. These results further indicate the need for agencies to use a holistic approach to address the interdependent complexities related to fathers' issues and include them in their placement decisions regarding the improvement of children's outcomes.

6.2.2. Tailoring agency efforts based on barriers

The present study provided several important findings concerning fathers' sociodemographic characteristics. There were more nonresident fathers with children from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds than nonresident fathers of Caucasian children. This finding is similar to previous findings regarding fathers' residency status (Nelson, 2004). Moreover, there was a significant relationship between the fathers' residency status and the length of their children's stay in foster care. Children with resident fathers spent less time in foster care than did children with non-resident fathers. This finding implies that the strategies that child welfare agencies use to engage fathers may need to be tailored to their residency status or other barriers.

The literature reviewed indicates that nonresident fathers who are not in romantic relationships with their children's mothers have the greatest barriers to engagement (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). Therefore, agencies might focus more on effective co-parenting in this group, which is associated with higher levels of father engagement (Fagan & Palkovitz). There is evidence that shows that non-resident fathers can have healthy bonds with their children and make significant contributions to their children's development (Bellamy, 2009). However, they require more assistance than fathers who are already living with their children when the children are placed in foster care.

For instance, resident fathers should presumably have stronger bonds with their children than do fathers who were recently located and informed that they had children in foster care. Thus, resident fathers should feel more obligated and motivated to get their children back home and out of foster care. Therefore, interventions with resident fathers should be offered quickly because

these men have already established relationships with their children. On the other hand, fathers without relationships with their children or fathers with intermittent contact with their children may benefit from wrap-around, intensive services and counseling that can gradually strengthen these relationships as they get to know their children. In addition, fathers without legal custody would benefit from advocacy services that address their legal rights as parents and custodial issues prior to parent education or family counseling.

6.3. Agency collaboration and policy leniency

To address fathers' complex needs and barriers to involvement, collaborative efforts must be made by child welfare agencies, community-based agencies, and mental health and substance abuse agencies (Darlington et al., 2005 and Earner, 2007) that include relaxed federal and agency policies regarding child support enforcement and the termination of parental rights (Ryan et al., 2006). Additionally, researchers recommend that an ecological approach with an emphasis on employment services be used to increase father involvement while addressing societal factors (Behnke et al., 2008 and Earner, 2007). These factors lay beyond the scope of the data in this present study. However, they are of great importance because fathers who do not meet case plan goals or who fear going deeper into debt due to child support, facing jail time, or having their wages garnished for child support might surmise that it would be simpler for them relinquish their parental rights to avoid that reality.

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