

Child Welfare: Determinants of a Child's Length of Stay in the System

By

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Abstract

The child welfare system was established in the 1935 Social Security Act to help families and their children. Children have been the inspiration for protection and assistance among families especially those living in poverty. Previous research aims to analyze the associations between a child's living arrangements and several child outcomes. Children who experience separation from their homes and families have significant trauma, which can impact a child's length of stay in the child welfare system. Children who experience family disruption may end up with different long-term outcomes and race and geography may contribute to the length of stay in the system.

This paper analyzes the potential effect of individual and community characteristics on a child's length of stay in the welfare system. I use 2018 DCFS caseload data from Los Angeles County, California and 2010 U.S. Census poverty data from Los Angeles (L.A.) to examine the association between community and individual characteristics and a child's length of stay in the child welfare system. I assess whether children from poorer neighborhoods have longer lengths of stay, net of other demographic variables including age, gender, race, and ethnicity. I find that by controlling for gender, age, poverty, and ethnicity, the length of stay of a child is impacted by race and age, but not poverty and gender. I also review policies currently being followed in the L.A child welfare system and explain policy implications for going forward.

Introduction

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System [AFCARS] in their 2018 analysis, reported that about seven hundred thousand children were served by the foster care system during the 2018 fiscal year in the child welfare system in the United States. The Child Welfare Information Gateway defines child welfare system as a group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families to successfully care for their children (2016). Most children first become involved with child welfare because of a report of suspected child abuse or neglect (child maltreatment). Child welfare systems are complex, and they vary from state to state. Based on the findings and evidence, child protective services workers at the end of the investigation decide whether there are enough findings to proceed with court action or not. Then the court can determine whether the child needs to be taken out of the home for a short term or long term. Due to human mistakes, potential prejudices of social workers, and flaws in procedures, some children end up staying in the system longer compared to other children. These mistakes, prejudices and flaws may not be completely random, but rather may be tied to the class and race of children and their families.

This paper aims to analyze some of the determinants of a child's length of stay in the child welfare system, specifically for children entering the welfare system in L.A County. The size and complexity of L.A. County's child welfare system, plus the national attention drawn to it by a recent film documenting significant failures of that system (Netflix 2020), make it a compelling case to study. The hypothesis I test is whether children who were removed from homes in zip codes where the median household income was below the poverty line have longer stays in the system compared to those that came from communities with higher incomes. I also

test how a child's ethnicity, gender, and age impact their length of stay in the child welfare system. Using data from the County of Los Angeles Open Data website and the 2010 U.S Census, results of a negative binomial regression confirm that age and ethnicity have an effect on how long children stay in the system. Specifically, black children have longer lengths of stay in the system compared to other ethnicities. Children 18 years and older also have longer lengths of stay in the child welfare system than younger children.

In the first part of this study, I use existing literature on child welfare, to inform my hypotheses. Subsequently, I present the data and variables and describe the negative binomial regression model, and the methods I use. I conclude with my findings and discuss potential avenues for future research as well as policy implications and recommendations.

Literature Review

The length of stay in the child welfare system is a function of a child's circumstances, available alternatives, and the actions of actors in the child welfare system. Cucinotta et. al. (2012), investigated child, family, and system factors related to extended length of stay in out-of-home placement. They studied a large sample of youth ranging from 3 to 21 years who had been in foster care for at least 37 months. Using a multinomial logistic regression analysis, they found that several children and parent-related risk factors were associated with longer lengths of stay in out of home care. Being Black and male were among the strongest predictors. Their results confirmed those of Kemp and Bodonyi's (2002) earlier work in which they documented the influence of race, age, and gender of the children or youth on length of stay in placement. These findings are consistent with observations that some children are overrepresented in the

system. In the USA it has been reported repeatedly that Black children are over-represented in the out-of-home care population compared to White children (Harris and Hackett 2008).

Most research has addressed the overrepresentation of certain racial and ethnic populations in the child welfare system. This has caught the attention of administrators of welfare programs, who have started to address these issues by starting with a children's bill of rights that includes the right to adequate living conditions and respect. Additionally, studies also indicate that racial disparities occur at various decision points in child welfare, especially at the start of the process where children of color are targeted to be at risk for being taken out of their homes and separated by their families.

The child welfare system addresses individual cases, but individual children and their families live in environments that are capable of encouraging safe, healthy development for children. For example, Showalter (2019) has studied how the places in which people live affect their experiences with drugs (which increases the probability of their children entering the child welfare system) by using data collected in small and remote towns in California and finds that in these areas there are fewer important institutions that "reduce exposure to addictive drugs and the traumas that provoke their use (or that) mitigate the harmful effects of ongoing drug use" (p.7). Showalter (2019) also finds lower levels of serious and violent crime in non-urban areas than in areas with greater populations. Cities with low economic level standard of living like the ones that Showalter studied, have higher rates of drug use and are less likely to receive treatment for addiction, ultimately leaving the children in these communities vulnerable and at higher risks of entering the child welfare system.

Within cities and towns, neighborhoods can also impact children's exposure to environments that harm them. Bywater et. al. (2015) state that family characteristics such as

being inclined to maltreat their children are more likely to find themselves in disadvantaged neighborhoods either from choice or lack of choice. A similar report by Bruce et. al. (2007) also studied neighborhood characteristics in which they report that a positive association between poverty and maltreatment rates in black children. They also report that poverty and unemployment are positively associated with higher rates of maltreatment among Hispanic children in female headed households. Coulton et. al. (2007) also find that there are more child maltreatment cases in disadvantaged areas. This is where child welfare makes its first appearance and removes children from their homes to place them in safer areas. Because wealthy individuals tend to segregate into affluent neighborhoods and the poor into poor neighborhoods (Dwyer 2007) there is reason to believe that neighborhood poverty could be associated with children being removed from the home and kept away from being reunified with their families. This neighborhood segregation by class holds to be especially evident in the city of Los Angeles.

Poverty is one of the strongest predictors for children entering the child welfare system. Seccombe (2007) reports that being in poverty affects an individual's well-being – both parents and children. Individuals in poverty suffer from a variety of health conditions (Seccombe p.50). Not only do they suffer from malnourishment, but many children suffer from behavioral and health problems and learning disabilities. Oftentimes these conditions go undiagnosed and untreated because of lack of resources and money. It is conditions like these that determine whether children are unsafe in their homes and need to be removed.

As the population of L.A County grows, more and more children are entering the welfare system. Rising costs of living and childcare costs are placing parents under tremendous stress, a recipe for failing to provide a healthy environment for their children. Thus, more children in these neighborhoods are vulnerable to harm and vulnerable to being taken from their homes by

the child welfare system. While earlier research has focused on the influence of race and ethnicity, poverty may be even more central in understanding these patterns.

Poverty itself is not just an absence of resources. Lawson (2012) explores the concept of relational poverty. The poor do not choose poverty, rather it is a result of the social policies and barriers we choose to follow and construct economically and socially. It is also strongly tied to the environment that the poor grow up and are socialized in. Though policies and programs like cash assistance and affordable housing are implemented to help and support the poor, lack of funding and political support tend to add to the failure of eliminating poverty among communities.

Tong and Kim (2019) document how the growing poverty distribution has changed in the Los Angeles-Long Beach Combined Statistical Area and why. They point out that the spatial distribution of poverty shapes the spatial vulnerabilities of children potentially entering and staying in the child welfare system. They also report that larger cities are more likely to report poverty and point out that structural barriers have influenced the inability to keep up with cost of living and child expenses. This could be a result of a fast-growing population and inadequate policies that go out of date to meet the population's needs.

It is evident that there is a disproportionate effect among children of color and how long they stay in the care of the child welfare system. Reskin (2012) argues that a race discrimination system results from both a system of race-linked disparities and a system that maintains them. This concept of a discrimination system is potentially useful for understanding the child welfare system in L.A. County. The most common racial or ethnic group living below the poverty line in Los Angeles County is not Black, but Hispanic, followed by White and Other. Reskin (2012)

shows disparities that favor whites over people of color across systems and institutions in American society, one being child welfare.

And yet, the strong relationship between poverty and maltreatment does not fully explain racial disproportionality and disparity in children's entry into and staying in the child welfare system. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2018) reports that in the Department of Human Services it is also possible that child welfare staff have their own racial biases. Studies in Texas found that race, risk, and income all influence case decisions. They found that even if an African American family scored low for maltreatment risk, they still had higher rates of children being removed from their homes compared to their white counterparts (Dettlaff et al. 2011; Rivaux et al. 2008). Child welfare system factors may affect the services and outcomes of children of different race and ethnicities. A review of the Michigan child welfare system recognized various institutional characteristics that negatively impact children and families of color including limited access to advocates, agencies not providing services in African-American communities, even when required to do so, and a lack of alternative possibilities to help families, which all contribute to different outcomes across children in the system (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2009).

This study focuses attention on both child demographic characteristics (including not only race and ethnicity but also gender and age), as well as the potential role of neighborhood poverty on a child's length of stay in the welfare system. Examining this in a rapidly changing environment undergoing a process of gentrification and increasing residential class segregation (L.A. County) offers the opportunity to identify how larger neighborhood effects may influence children's well-being.

Data

Data from L.A. County may offer insights into other rapidly changing urban environments around the country. The data provided by the L.A County department of child and family services caseload statistics represents two 'snapshots' of the department's caseload as of December 31, 2016 and December 31, 2018. The County of Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) fiscal reports show little change in number of children in the welfare system between the years 2016 and 2018 with 167,500 children in 2016 and 167,294 children in 2018. L.A County has been subject to have a poor record of monitoring their child welfare system and has been investigated as reports highlight the increasing number of child mortality in the system, like in the documentary of Gabriel Fernandez (Netflix, 2020.). These data from the County of L.A include 91,380 observations and are public with individual identifiers (names and personal addresses) removed. As an extra precaution, if fewer than 20 records were found in each zip code, those records having that zip code were not included

Methods

My dependent variable is a child's length of stay in the child welfare system. Specifically, it is measured as the number of months between when the child was removed from home up until the date of this report (December 31, 2018). I control for a number of child and community-based characteristics, including gender (whether the child is a girl or boy), and age (measured in age brackets specified below). Children 18 and older can choose to stay in the system if they want to continue receiving help whether it is for transitional services and housing. Ethnicity in the L.A. County DCFS data is coded as race (whether the child is black, white, American Indian, Pacific Islander or Asia, and other and whether the child is Hispanic). Race and ethnicity are different concepts, wherein racial minorities may have different ethnicities.

The L.A. County data do not address this distinction, but designate children as being in one of these listed racial/ethnic categories. I therefore informally use the word ethnicity to connote these categories of Black, indigenous, or other people of color. I operationalize community characteristics based upon the poverty level in the zip code the child originally lived in¹. Children are characterized as living in “poverty” if they lived in a zip code of median household income was below \$32,000, which is the poverty line for a family of 4. Table 1 provides a description of each variable and how they were measured.

Table 1.

VARIABLE NAME	DESCRIPTION
LENGTH OF STAY	Computed from the day a child was taken from their homes rounded to the nearest month.
ETHNICITY	How a child is initially and officially recorded at the start of a child welfare investigation. American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, white, other.
AGE	Birth- 2 years 3-4 year 5-9 years 10-13 years 14-15 years 16-17 years 18 and older
POVERTY	0 if MHI is less than \$32,000 1 if MHI is above \$32,000
GENDER	Female Male

¹ The L.A County DCFS data’s variable “Separate_Family_zip” indicates the zip code of the resident family from which a child was separated or removed from the home. Zip codes with a value of '0' (which I code as missing data) means the zip code is unknown, possibly due to homelessness (Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services).

Results

Table 2, reporting the negative binomial regression model, indicates that all individual-specific characteristics, but not community characteristics (notably whether a child lived in a zip code below the poverty line) were statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval. This indicates that the area poverty does not have an impact that I expected.

Confirming my expectations, ethnicity, gender and the age of the child impacted the lengths of stay. All age categories demonstrated significantly longer lengths of stay in the system than children under the age of 3. Boys had a significantly longer stay than girls.

I also graphically depict the predicted length of stay (in months, with their 95% (confidence intervals) for children of different ages, races and gender in the figures below. Figure 1 documents predicted length of stay by a child's race. The plot output indicates that black children have longer stays in the system and the expected count of months spent in the system are much higher compared to their counterparts. On the other hand, the expected number of months a child of Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic spends in the system is much less than children of black and white descent. The predicted number of months a black child would spend in the system is 32 months, compared to Asian/Pacific Islander where their predicted number of months is 22 and 25 for White children. As opposed to their Hispanic counterparts with a predicted number of 24 months. American Indian/Alaskan children expected number of months is 29, while children of other races typically stay in the child welfare system on average for 23 months.

Table 2.

Independent Variables	
Age	
3-4yrs	0.495** (0.000)
5-9yrs	0.679** (0.000)
10-13yrs	0.979** (0.000)
14-15yrs	1.183** (0.000)
16-17yrs	1.353** (0.000)
18-older	1.741** (0.000)
Gender	
Male	0.076** (0.000)
Ethnicity	
Pacific Islander/Asian	0.307** (0.000)
Black	0.076 (0.200)
Hispanic	-0.189** (0.001)
Other	-0.240** (0.000)
White	0.152** (0.000)
Poverty	
Yes (lives in an impoverished zip code)	0.005 (0.684)

¹ Estimator used was negative binominal regression. Birth-2 years is the baseline category for age, female is the baseline category for gender, American Indian/Alaskan is the baseline category for race/ethnicity and living in a zip code with a median income above the poverty line is the baseline category for poverty. P-values are in parentheses. * and ** indicate significance on a 95% and 99% confidence interval, respectively.

Figure 1.

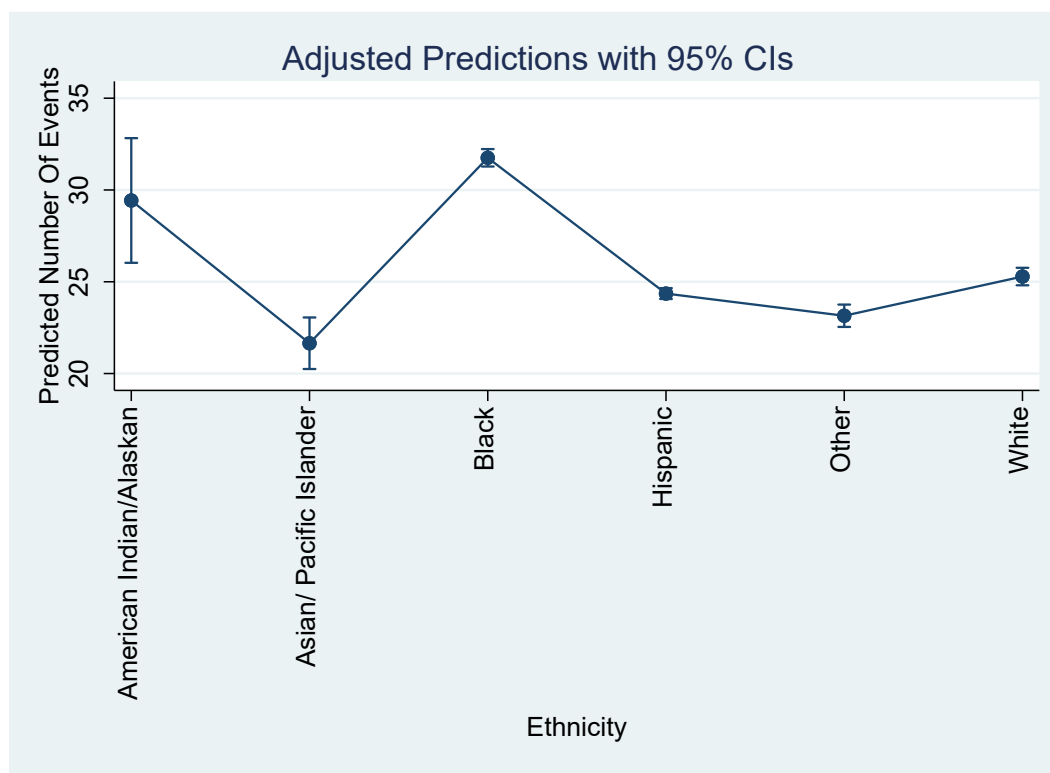


Figure 2 presents the predicted length of stay by the gender of the child. The difference is not dramatically different, however when it comes to gender, the output indicates a male child's predicted number of months in a facility is higher than a female child. Male children's predicted number of months is 27, compared to their female counterparts with 25 months.

Figure 2.

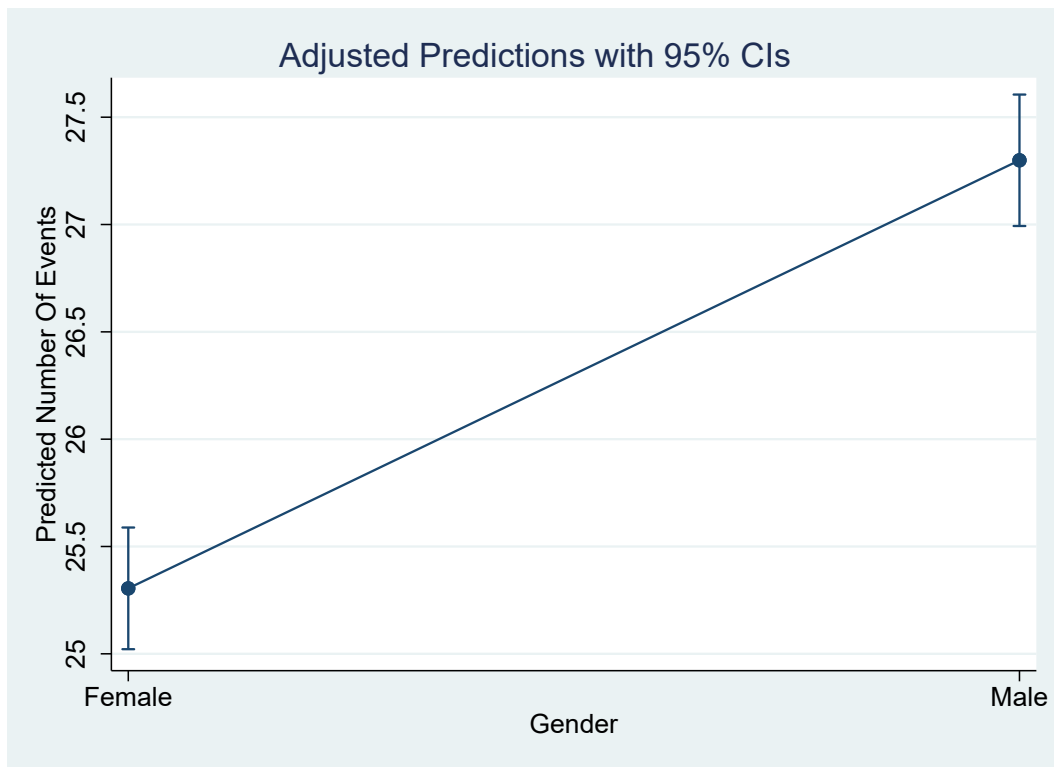
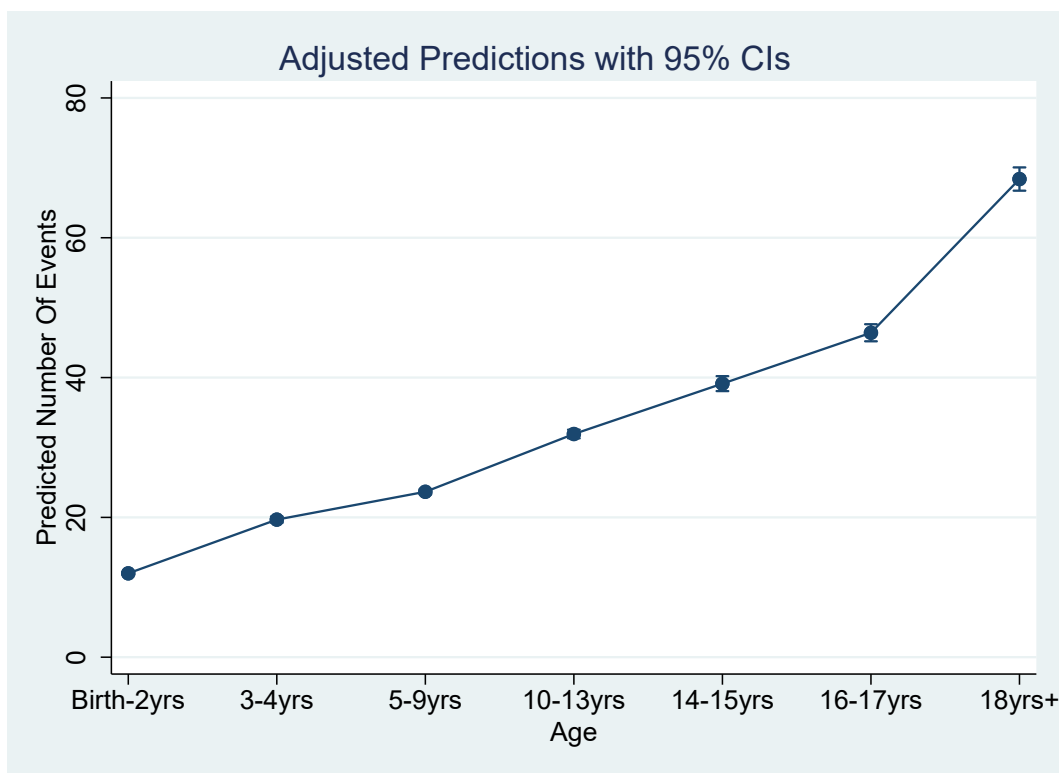


Figure 3 documents the predicted length of stay by a child's age bracket. Children 18 years and older have a higher predicted number of months in a facility compared to younger children, with children from birth to two years have the least expected number of months in the system. The years increase steadily but non-linearly from 12 to 20, 24, 32, 39, and 46 respectively, with those 18 and older having the highest number of 68 months. This could be due to the fact the younger children have a higher chance of reunification than older children, but it is not clear in this data set, or the fact that younger children have been alive for a smaller number of months than older children.

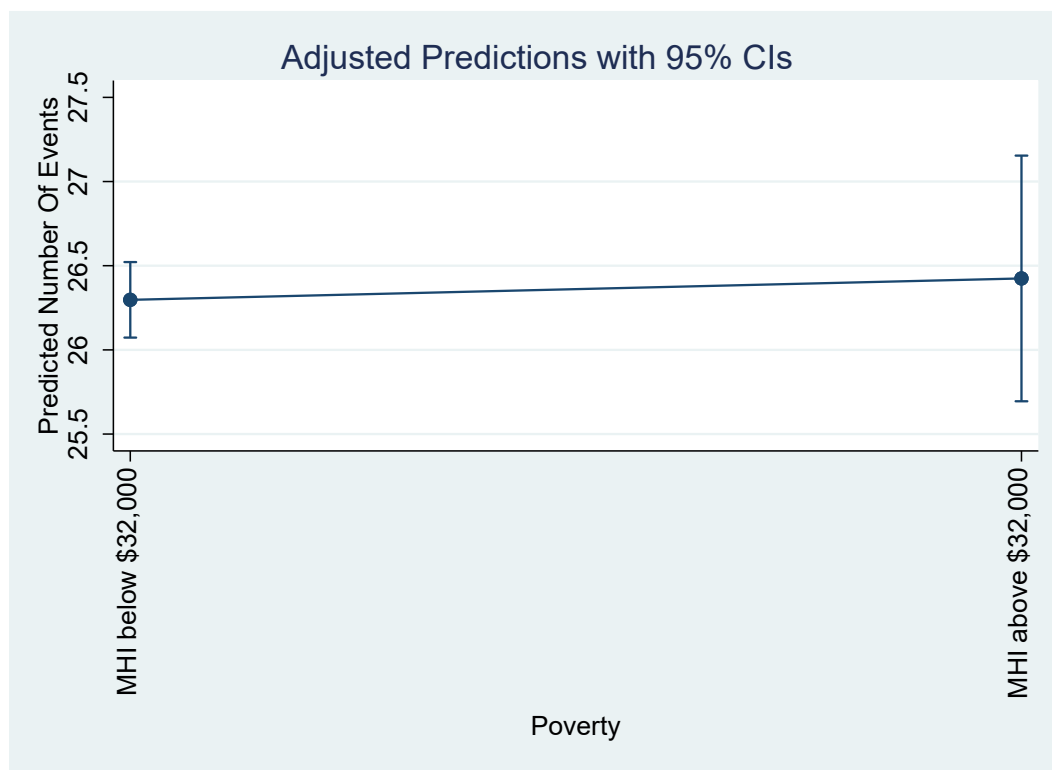
Figure 3.



In contrast, community characteristics do not appear to significantly impact the length of stay that children have in the welfare system. From Figure 4 below, children taken from zip codes with median incomes below the poverty line have statistically similar lengths of stay

(26.17 months) as children taken from zip codes with median incomes above the poverty line (whose average length of stay in the system is 26.29 months).

Figure 4.



Conclusion

This paper analyzes and tests the determinants of a child's length of stay in the child welfare system. I hypothesized that children who were taken from a zip code in which it was reported that their median household income was less than \$32,000 would have longer stays in the system compared to their counterparts. However, this did not materialize in my results. Rather, I found that individual characteristics most significantly impacted the length of a child's stay in the system. Black children had higher lengths of stay than their Hispanic and white

counter-parts, older children had higher lengths of stay than younger ones, and boys had longer lengths of stay than girls.

Limitations to this data set could impact the difference in length of stay between different variables. Webster et. al. (2002) mention in their report that data systems used by child welfare agencies are often inadequate and there is a limitation in the data because these data are made up of periodic snapshots of the caseload of children in care at a given point in time, though this information is important it does not accurately capture the experience of all the children who go into the child welfare system (Webster p.478). A variable that I did not control for that could impact a child's length of stay is if they have been in foster care already. Long foster care stays within children reduce the chance of permanency. The longer a child has been in the system the more "at risk" they may be perceived by potential host families. Further research and literature should focus on this effect, as there is little to no research of children who have no choice but to be taken from the welfare system. As a result, the lack of research and literature made it difficult to capture past experiences and a thorough literature review. Race and ethnicity may be incorrectly assumed by the person recording the data. Case workers can also assume a child does not identify as a certain race or ethnicity because racial bias and discrimination. These issues affect the data output describing the number of children from a particular race or ethnicity who are in the child welfare system. Fluke et. al. (2011) explain that racial disproportionality and disparity could be explained by disproportionate and disparate needs of children and families of color, particularly due to higher rates of poverty. Racial bias and discrimination along with child welfare system factors such as, lack of resources for families of color and caseworker characteristics can also mask the truth behind data.

I controlled for neighborhood poverty rather than poverty measured among the families from which the children come. Therefore, further research needs to examine how family poverty levels affect the length of stay in the child welfare system so that effective Child Welfare policies are written. Finally, this study examined the relationship between length of stay in the child welfare system and demographics of the child, like, ethnicity, age, and gender only in L.A. County. Poverty levels vary from state to state and county to county, but it is still extremely prevalent. This paper not only helped examine inequalities within L.A. County, but also larger issues at stake like institutionalized discrimination and inequalities among our U.S Child Welfare System. A possible explanation for the little difference between poverty and length of stay in this data set is that poverty levels by zip code does not necessarily speak for children actually living in poverty. For example, children living in zip codes whose average income is above the poverty line might live in a household whose income is below it. Data from the L.A. Child Welfare System does not include poverty level for each child, making it difficult to analyze if a child's stand in poverty affect the length of stay in the system.

When reviewing data pertaining to race and ethnicity it is important to understand the inherent difficulties that come with collecting and analyzing this type of data. Race and ethnicity do not have quantifiable definitions (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). People may identify their race or ethnicity based on a number of factors like, family and social environment, historical or sociopolitical definitions, and personal experience. Race seems to be defined by certain physical traits, while ethnicity defines people using their background (religion, culture, linguistics, etc.) The definitions for a particular race or ethnicity may change from study to study. For example, in the L.A data base, they combine the terms and confine it to ethnicity to explain a child's race or ethnicity. It is why I chose to stick with the language, but it is important to know that race and

ethnicity are different. One must also consider that how people identify their own race or ethnicity can change over time. Researchers found that more than 10 million people changed their race or ethnicity selections from the 2000 census to the 2010 census (Cohn 2014). It is why it is necessary to perform reports regularly. This system comes into play when we define gender. This data base limits gender and sexuality to binary choices, female or male. This fails to include children who identify otherwise, leaving data to be very limit and not inclusive.

To relate the findings presented here to practice and policy, it is important to first note that the child welfare system across the nation in nature was intended to serve as a temporary resource for families in need. However, the complex nature of society and the increasing number of child welfare agencies have resulted in a need for the comprehensive range of social services. As described here, poverty among other internal and external factors contribute to the well-being and the future of children and families. The child welfare system alone cannot provide all the services needed. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016) states that racial discrimination is just one of the issues that challenge the capacity of the child welfare system and its staff to provide effective services to children and families.

Using my findings that children of color and male children, I propose that the child welfare system promote the safety and health of children in families of color. Though permanency is the goal for child welfare, it is not an understood value across families taking in children. Most families think that they will stay for a certain amount of time and children can be returned to the state if the child becomes regarded as no longer a good “fit” in their homes. A policy that can achieve this would be mandatory training courses to foster parents that promote a long term goals for the child, like permanency. Children of color from families of color are expected to be taken from their homes at higher rates than white children. The literature reviewed above states

that due to discrimination and biases from workers, families of color have the most reported numbers of being separated. Prevention programs and supporting biological families by supporting children to remain with their families can be implemented by child welfare agencies. These goals can be accomplished by providing resources to parents. Often, biological families do not have the resources or support to take in another child. This is why many child welfare children end up being a state's child rather than a family's child. Thus, one policy I recommend is to create staff training programs that teach workers about racial bias. By employing staff that understand and are knowledgeable of culture and targeted populations, prevention programs can provide support and education to families and children from other cultures and ethnicities on at risk maltreatment that result in children being taken from their families. Moreover, if children are taken from their biological parents, policies should reflect that a child can be placed with a relative or a family with similar culture, language, and or race, but don't always do so. The Child Welfare Policy Manual of L.A. County in the section "Evaluating a Prospective Caregiver 0100-520.10" currently reflects policy that states, "DCFS is not permitted to honor a parent's preference for placing a child in a particular home based on race, color, or national origin, or to delay the placement of a child for adoption when an approved family is available solely because the home is located outside of the county or state." Policies only factor in placement preference when children are adopted or when a child was left by the hands of the biological parents, meaning that if a child is forcefully taken from their families (what happens the majority of the time) they are not accounted for placement preference. Current policy also states that, "A child can be placed in the home of an appropriate relative or a non-relative extended family member (NREFM) pending the consideration of other relative who have requested preferential consideration, Non-custodial parents are not required to have their homes approved, and a non-

relative extended family member (NREFM) is considered only when there is no relative who is willing and appropriate to care for the child.”

These current policies fail to target the issue of permanency for the child. The child is moved from one home to another and the home in which they might stay is not required to be approved. I propose policy that requires all homes to be inspected for safety and proper resources for a child to live healthy. For example, taking extra measures if a family is already on living assistance (SNAP/TANF) and if adding another child to the family would be beneficial for the child and the foster family. In the case of Gabriel Fernandez, child welfare workers observed the poor condition that Gabriel was living in and made reports of how he was bruised and scratched, however no changes were made because the mother always lied and said he, “just fell.” WIC Section 16504.5 – Authorizes a child welfare agency to initiate a criminal background check through California Law Enforcement Telecommunications Systems when evaluating the home of a relative or non-relative extended family member, however it is not enforced among all agencies (California Legislative Information 2018).

While the child welfare system has been known for the challenges and concerns it raises for serving families and children, it still serves an important role. Agencies can support and promote child safety by hiring competent staff, and administration can be just as supportive of the differences that arise in their communities and families. Resources can be made available and quality service for children and families can be possible.

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