



COFCCA SPOTLIGHT ON...

Infants in Out-of-Home Care

How do the characteristics and experiences of infants entering foster care differ from those of older children? New Chapin Hall brief examines some of these.

A recent and thoughtful issue brief, published by Chapin Hall, argues that infants in foster care represent a distinct subset of all foster care children who have “service needs as well as developmental vulnerabilities and strengths that distinguish them from other children in out-of-home care.”ⁱ

The brief, entitled “**Who Are the Infants in Out-of-Home Care? An Epidemiological and Developmental Snapshot**” by Fred Wulczyn, Michelle Ernst, and Philip Fisherⁱⁱ, examines five domains in which infants in care differ from older children in care. This article provides valuable insights and raises significant questions about how the field of child welfare should think about infants in care: their vulnerabilities, resiliency, and about how to improve the odds for their success.

The five domains studied are:

1) Incidence of first-time out-of-home placements. Infants are a disproportionately large percentage of first-time admissions to out-of-home care. In fact, almost one in four children admitted to care for the first time is under the age of one year.

2) Duration in care. Children who enter care as infants will, on average, spend more of their childhood in care than older children entering care.

3) Experiences in care. Infants spend more of their time in foster homes and less time in group homes than older children. Infants are also adopted at higher rates than older children, with 50 percent of children who enter care at less than 3 months of age leaving care with a new set of parents.

4) Characteristics. Infants who enter care differ from older children in terms of their own characteristics, characteristics of their birth families, and characteristics of the contexts in which they live.

5) Vulnerability for delayed development. Infants in care are particularly vulnerable to delays in emotional, social, and cognitive development. This may place them at particularly high risk for the negative outcomes commonly observed among foster children, including school failure, drug and alcohol abuse, and criminality.ⁱⁱⁱ

The first three of these five domains are considered using data from Multistate Foster Care Data Archive, which includes longitudinal placement data from fourteen states. The fourth domain, Characteristics of Infants In Care, examined these children in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW).

For the fifth domain, Vulnerability for Delayed Development, the authors summarize existing, and some very recent, research related to the topic. In this section the authors discuss the impact of “toxic stress”^{iv} on infants, neglect as a source of toxic stress, and its influence on future health disparities^v. The authors conclude the brief on a positive note stating that “There is extremely promising evidence that a

large amount of recovery is possible following exposure to early stress if adequate support is provided to parents, foster parents, or other caregivers, and if the proper therapeutic techniques are employed.^{vi} ^{vii}

This brief provides information, offers insights, raises questions, and identifies avenues for further research.

ⁱ Wulczyn F., Ernst, M. & Fisher, P. (2011). *Who Are the Infants in Out-of-Home Care? An Epidemiological and Developmental Snapshot*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Available at: <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/brief/who-are-infants-out-home-care>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} Shonkoff, J. P., & Bales, S. N. (2011). Science does not speak for itself: Translating child development research for the public and its policymakers. *Child Development*, 82(1), 17-32. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01538.x

^v Shonkoff, J. P., Boyce, W. T., & McEwen, B. S. (2009). Neuroscience, molecular biology, and the childhood roots of health disparities: Building a new framework for health promotion and disease prevention. *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, 301(21), 2252-2259. doi:10.1001/jama.2009.754

^{vi} Wulczyn F., Ernst, M. & Fisher, P. (2011). *Who Are the Infants in Out-of-Home Care? An Epidemiological and Developmental Snapshot*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

^{vii} Fisher, P. A., & Stoolmiller, M. (2008). Intervention effects on foster parents stress: Associations with child cortisol levels. *Development and Psychopathology*, 20(3), 1003-1021. doi:10.1017/S0954579408000473

Dozier, M., Peloso, E., Lewis, E., Laurenceau, J.-P., & Levine, S. (2008). Effects of an attachment-based intervention of the cortisol production of infants and toddlers in foster care. *Development and Psychopathology* 20 (3), 845-859. doi: 10.1017/S0954579408000400