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Adoption Disruption and Dissolution

Definitions

What is disruption?

The term *disruption* is used to describe an adoption process that ends after the child is placed in an adoptive home and **before** the adoption is legally finalized, resulting in the child's return to (or entry into) foster care or placement with new adoptive parents.

What is dissolution?

The term *dissolution* is used to describe an adoption that ends **after** it is legally finalized, resulting in the child's return to (or entry into) foster care or placement with new adoptive parents.

Disruptions

How many adoptions disrupt?

Individual studies of different populations throughout the United States are consistent in reporting disruption rates that range from about 10 to 25 percent—depending on the population studied, the duration of the study, and geographic or other factors (Goerge, Howard, Yu, & Radomsky, 1997; Festinger, 2002; Festinger, in press). A few examples are listed below:

- Festinger (in press) summarizes more than 25 reports on disruption rates and notes that the rates reported since the mid-1980s, despite some variations, do not differ substantially. Excluding studies that singled out small groups of older children, disruption rates have mostly varied from about 9 to 15 percent. Among older children, the reported rate has reached roughly 25 percent.
- Barth, Gibbs, and Siebenaler (2001) reported in a literature review that studies show that between 10 and 16 percent of adoptions of children over age 3 disrupt; no comparable figures are available for children under age 3.
- Goerge et al. (1997) conducted a longitudinal study of disruption and dissolution in thousands of public agency adoptions in Illinois from 1976 through 1994 and found that slightly over 12 percent disrupted.
- Barth and Berry (1988) reported a disruption and dissolution rate of 10 percent for children older than 3 years in a group of more than 1,000 children adopted from the child welfare system in California. Berry and Barth (1990) found a disruption and dissolution rate of 24 percent for children ages 12 to 17 for a sample of 99 adolescents.
- The U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) surveyed public child welfare agencies and reported that about 5 percent of planned adoptions from foster care disrupted in 1999 and 2000 (U.S. GAO, 2003). Researchers have questioned the validity of this finding because a minority of States responded, and States had differing capacities to respond as well as potentially differing interpretations of the requested information.

Why do adoptions disrupt?

Although specific causes of disruption may vary with each situation, the primary factors (correlates) in disruptions are well documented. Several studies have shown that the rate of disruption increases with the age of the child. Other correlates include the number of placements the child experienced while in foster care, the behavioral and emotional needs of the child, and agency staff turnover (Barth & Miller, 2000; Berry 1997; Groza & Rosenberg, 2001; Festinger, 2001; Smith & Howard, 1999). Research suggests that disruption is probably less likely when services have been provided (Goerge et al., 1997), although no direct links have been shown between particular services and disruption rates. However various service characteristics, such as staff discontinuities (different workers responsible for preparing child and family), have been linked to disruption (Festinger, 1990).

Dissolutions

How many adoptions dissolve?

Accurate data on dissolutions are more difficult to obtain, because at the time of legal adoption, a child's records may be closed, first and last names and social security number may be changed, and other identifying information may be modified. The Federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) includes two data elements to show previous adoption for a child in foster care—whether the child was ever previously adopted and, if so, age at adoption—but those data are reported only for children in public foster care and do not capture adoption dissolution if the children do not come to the attention of the public child welfare system. Also, some researchers have observed that these data are inconsistently reported by the States. Studies consistently report that only a small percentage of completed adoptions dissolve—probably between 1 and 10 percent.

- Festinger (2002) found that 4 years after adoption, about 3.3 percent of children adopted from public and voluntary agencies in New York City in 1996 were or had been in foster care since adoption. In most of these situations the adoptive parent reported an expectation that the child would return to their home again.

- A study of children adopted in Kansas City showed that 3 percent of adopted children were not living with their adoptive parents 18 to 24 months after adoption (McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001).
- In a longitudinal study of families in Iowa who were receiving adoption subsidies, Groze (1996) found that 8 percent of the children were placed out of the home after 4 years. However, in all cases the families did not dissolve the adoption and were considered to be connected to and invested in the adopted child.
- A study of public agency adoptions in Illinois reported that adoptions dissolved at a rate of 6.6 percent between 1976 and 1987 (Goerge et al., 1997).
- The GAO reported that about 1 percent of the public agency adoptions finalized in fiscal years 1999 and 2000 later were legally dissolved. The report cautioned that the 1 percent figure represents only adoptions that failed relatively soon after being finalized, so the number of dissolutions could have increased with time (U.S. GAO, 2003).

Why do adoptions dissolve?

One study found that the rate of dissolution increased with the age of the child at adoption and was more common for male or non-Hispanic children (Goerge et al. 1997). Festinger (2002) reported that although dissolution is rare, families who adopt children with special needs from foster care undergo enormous struggles and face serious barriers to obtaining needed services. The two barriers most often mentioned by adoptive families were lack of information about where to go for services and the cost of services (Festinger, 2002; Soderlund, Epstein, Quinn, Cumblad, & Petersen, 1995).

Are disruptions and dissolutions increasing?

Data indicate that, contrary to concerns expressed by professionals about an increase in disruptions, disruptions in Illinois were *decreasing* before 1997 (Goerge et al., 1997). In a more recent study summarizing more than 25 reports on disruption rates, Festinger (in press) concluded that reported

Trends

rates have remained fairly constant (with minor variations) since the 1980s.

Professionals have expressed concern that recent public and private initiatives to increase adoptions and decrease time to adoption might lead to inadequate selection and preparation of adoptive homes. Those concerns have often focused on the shortened legal timeframes to file for termination of parental rights unless there was some exception required by the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). The U.S. GAO addressed this question of the impact of ASFA (2002, 2003), indicating that it was not possible to determine whether the increase in adoptions reported after ASFA reflects changes in data quality or actual changes in outcomes for children.

Data Sources

No national data are collected on the number of disruptions and dissolutions or the percentages of adoptive placements that end in disruption or dissolution. Most of the data that are collected are for adoptions from public agencies or those under contract from public agencies. No national studies are available on disruptions or dissolutions of intercountry adoptions or adoptions from private sources. There are no national data collected on the number of independent, private, or tribal adoptions.

As mentioned above, while AFCARS includes two data elements to show previous adoption for a child in foster care—whether the child was ever previously adopted and, if so, age at adoption—those data are reported only for children in public foster care and do not capture adoption dissolutions if the children do not come to the attention of the public child welfare system. Also, some researchers have observed that these data are inconsistently reported by the States.

Future Research

What research still needs to be done?

Most of the research to date has focused on narrowly defined populations or adoptions from public agencies. A number of researchers have called for the establishment of uniform terminology and more complete and accurate outcome data (e.g., see Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2004; Groze, 1996;

Goerge et al., 1997). Further research on the cause of adoption disruptions or dissolutions could foster design and delivery of more evidence-based postplacement preventive services to prevent dissolution.

Additional research is needed in several areas:

- Total numbers of disruption and dissolution for all adoptions, regardless of type
- Links between pre- and postadoption services and disruption and dissolution rates
- Causes of dissolution or disruption
- Incidence of voluntary disruptions or dissolutions as a means of obtaining needed services for a child

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