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Gender and Foster Care Disruptions: An Exploratory Study

Harper Johnson

University of Cincinnati

## GENDER AND FOSTER CARE DISRUPTIONS

### Abstract

Being disrupted from a biological family into a foster home can be traumatic for children. Disrupting from the foster home can add stress and trauma to an already stressful situation. But why do children disrupt from foster homes? What factors come into play? This proposal specifically seeks out information on how gender may play a role in disruption from foster care. Looking at data from Focus on Youth foster care and behavioral health agency, this study seeks to understand the correlation between gender and foster care disruptions.

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### **Literature Review**

How does gender affect a child's permanency and amount of placements in foster care?

There is a plethora of research on the topic of child and adolescent adjustment in foster care. This research delves into the topics of emotional adjustment, trauma, and permanency. Unfortunately, very little research has been done on the effect of gender when it comes to foster care. My paper seeks to understand the effects of a child's gender on their behaviors in foster care, and how this may affect their permanency and amount of placements.

### **Foster Youth**

Foster youth face the emotions and consequences of not only the trauma of abuse, neglect, or loss but also the trauma of being placed out of their home environment and into a new one. Children are most vulnerable when placement is disrupted and attachments with caregivers are broken (Leve et al., 2012).

### ***Adjustment and Coping***

Studies show that children in foster care show worse educational outcomes, signifying a lack of adjustment and a need for intervention (O'higgins, Sebba, & Gardner, 2017). Children can only thrive educationally if their physical and emotional needs are being met. If children are still adjusting to a home or recovering from traumatic experiences, they cannot focus on other activities.

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### *Gender Differences Among Foster Youth*

Males in foster youth have been shown to have more difficulties in their educational lives (Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2012). Males and females also react to trauma differently and have different types of trauma. While males are more likely to experience death or injury, females are more likely to experience sexual trauma. Females experience more types of post-traumatic effects, and gender affects the behavior of kids who have been traumatized (Tolin & Foa, 2006).

### *The intersection of Gender, Race/Ethnicity*

African-American youth face intersectional challenges in foster care. They are more likely to face severe legal consequences for behaviors than their white peers (Williams-Butler, 2018). Black females especially are more likely to face social disadvantages and have their behavior interpreted negatively (Williams-Butler, Gale, & Dorsey, 2019).

### *Problem Behaviors*

Evidence suggests that problem behaviors put kids at extremely high risk for placement disruption. However, even children without problem behaviors are vulnerable to placement disruption and may develop issues with attachment (Chamberlain & Reid, 1994). This research also suggests that problem behaviors, not race, gender, or other factors are the cause alone for placement disruptions. Other studies agree with these findings, but do not address issues of gender. Overall, it is agreed that problem behaviors are the leading predictor of the number of placements (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000),

## **Introduction**

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The problem that will be researched is how gender affects a child's permanency and amount of placements in foster care. Literature suggests that boys and girls react very differently to trauma (Tolin & Foa, 2006). With this in mind, behaviors in foster care might vary drastically between boys and girls. Knowing that behavior is the most reliable indicator of the amount of placements children have (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000), This study aims to understand how gender affects how many displacements children experience in foster care. Displacements can cause further trauma for foster children, and understanding the scope of this problem can help prevent unnecessary displacements. Social workers have an obligation to advocate for our clients, especially those who cannot advocate for themselves. By understanding biases in foster care, we can work to address these biases in our practice.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research Design***

This study will be taking into account both quantitative and qualitative data. Data will be collected on the children who have disrupted from foster homes, but each case will be individually reviewed by a Focus on Youth supervisor in order to understand why the disruption occurred. This blend of quantitative and qualitative data will help create a comprehensive report on the relationship between gender and disruption at Focus on Youth.

#### ***Type of Study***

This research is exploratory. The study aims to find any correlations between disruptions and gender. While data exists on gender and foster care, very little specifically addresses how the gender differences in trauma-related behaviors might impact disruption, and therefore further trauma.

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### ***Research Questions***

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

How does gender affect a foster parent's interpretation of trauma-related behaviors?

How does gender affect a foster parent's willingness to disrupt a placement?

How does gender affect the likelihood of being disrupted from the home at the foster parent's request?

### ***Variables of Interest***

Independent variables in this study include the gender of the children and their behaviors.

The dependent variable being measured is the disruption of the child from their foster home.

Operational definitions of variables and units of analysis

The ratio of boys to girls in all of Focus on Youth's care will be compared to the ratio of boys to girls that have disrupted from care in Focus on Youth. Any disparities in this ratio will be reported and discussed. This study is, however, mainly focused on qualitative data. Interviews with Focus on Youth supervisors about each disruption will be vital in understanding why these disruptions occurred.

### ***Measurement Instruments.***

At Focus on Youth, they are very diligent about collecting data for research in their field. This study has been provided the demographics of the children they serve. Focus on Youth also provides reports on children that are disrupted from their foster homes. This data will be compared to see if one gender, in particular, is disrupted more at Focus on Youth. The data does not provide explanations for each disruption, however. Each disruption will be discussed with a Focus on Youth supervisor.

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### *Hypothesis*

The hypothesis is that boys will be disrupted more frequently due to behavior more than girls. Boys tend to display violent behavior as a result of trauma more than girls do (Tolin, D. F., & Foa, E. B. 2006). Any violence or aggression is more likely to cause a foster parent to request that the child is discharged from the home. While female participants are more likely to have sexual behaviors (Tolin, D. F., & Foa, E. B. 2006), and these do cause foster parents to disrupt at times, and it is hypothesized that this will be less common.

### *The Setting*

Data will be collected from Focus on Youth. Focus on Youth is a foster care and behavioral health agency in West Chester, Ohio. Focus on Youth maintains an average of 100 children in their care at any given time, and works closely with families on all aspects of their foster child's care.

### *Sampling Method*

The sample in this study will be the children that have disrupted due to a 30-day foster parent's notice at Focus on Youth, as the majority of these disruptions are due to behavior. Data will be taken from 2018-2019.

### *The Sample*

The sample in this study will be the children that have disrupted due to a 30-day foster parent's notice at Focus on Youth, as the majority of these disruptions are due to behavior. These children range in age, race, and background. They are all from southwestern Ohio.

**Protection of Human Subjects.** Any data mentioning any identifying information of the subjects are only available on a secure server at Focus on Youth. Any data leaving the server has

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been scrubbed of all identifying information. This study will not contain any identifying information or case details.

**Human Diversity Issues.** The kids at Focus on Youth range in age, race, ability, and ethnicity. However, the population is very small and cannot represent all of Ohio or the United States' foster youth. This sample size should not be used as a representative for the entirety of the population.

### Data Collection Procedures

Focus on Youth collects data throughout each fiscal year on the children and families they serve including their yearly disruption report, detailed below.

Reason placement was disrupted	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20
AWOL	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Foster parent allegations	2	0	0	2	0	0	0
Foster parent request/ 30 day notice	18	13	17	26	21	19	20
Foster parent illness	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Placed in more restrictive environment	0	0	2	1	2	1	0
Other: Treatment team decision	6	3	0	5	7	6	4
Other: Pre-planned transition	3	0	0	1	0	0	0
Other: Foster parent retired	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other: Youth requested new home	0	2	0	0	1	0	0
Youth was Hospitalized	2	2	3	1	0	1	0
Total	34	20	22	36	32	28	24
	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20
Foster parent request/30 day notice	18	13	17	26	21	19	20

This data allows a framework for a follow-up with Focus on Youth supervisors, who will detail why the disruption took place. This qualitative data will allow deeper insight into how gender might play a role in disruptions.

### Data Analysis Plan

By looking at the disruption reports along with the gender of the children, as well as the ratio of the genders of the children that Focus on Youth serves. This, along with information provided by supervisors at Focus on Youth, will provide insight into gender's role in disruptions.



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### **Limitations of the Study**

Focus on Youth is a small agency, which allows for individual attention for each child. However, this means that the scope of this research will be very limited. The research also only encompasses children from the southwestern Ohio area.

Since Focus on Youth also provides behavioral health services, these interventions may help prevent disruptions. This means that the data from Focus on Youth may differ from other agencies that do not also provide these services. It is important that the results of this research should only be referenced by local Foster Care agencies, if any at all.

Focus on Youth will begin pulling data about race and ethnicity from disruptions in July. In the meantime, the intersectionality of race, ethnicity and gender cannot be addressed in this study.

### **Findings**

#### ***Data from Focus on Youth***

At Focus on Youth in the fiscal year of 2018, 11 disruptions out of 32 were due to behavioral reasons. 7 out of 11, or 63.6%, of behavioral disruptions were female. In 2019, 8 disruptions out of 28 were due to behavioral reasons. 5 out of 8 or 62.5% of the behavioral disruptions were female.

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In both years, females accounted for more disruptions, with disruptions being 62.9% female in 2018 and 63.2% female in 2019.

Behavioral Disruptions				
	FY18		FY19	
	#	%	#	%
Females	7	64%	5	38%
Males	4	36%	8	62%
Total	11	100%	13	100%

### *Surveying Focus on Youth Supervisors*

Discussion with Focus on Youth supervision proves to have valuable insight into foster care disruptions. The supervisor recalls both a male and female who disrupted due to behaviors in 2019. The male, aged 11, disrupted from his foster home and moved to a residential setting. He struggled with aggression and sexualized behaviors. The supervisor recalls this as “one of the more extreme” cases of behavioral disruption that she has seen in Focus on Youth’s recent history.

The female who disrupted, aged 16, had already disrupted from multiple homes. She struggled with aggression and other at-risk behaviors, and was moved to another foster home with less children to minimize risk.

According to the supervisor, there is no agency-wide protocol on steps that must be taken before a child disrupts. Each case is handled on an individual basis. When trying to prevent disruptions, sometimes there will be team meetings between a child’s foster family, agency worker, county worker, therapist, and any other involved staff to create a plan for the youth.

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These plans could involve seeking respite care, changing visitation schedules, or other interventions.

The supervisor says that she sees similar behaviors in Focus on Youth's male and female clients that disrupt due to behavior. Teen girls disrupt the most that she has noticed, but she also touches on the fact that there are more families accepting teen girls within the Focus on Youth foster network.

Sometimes, the children are not the reason for disruption. When a foster family disrupts a placement the first time, the supervisor says that Focus on Youth keeps an eye on them to make sure they are not overwhelmed. After a second or third disruption from one family, depending on the circumstances, the foster family will meet with Focus on Youth staff to create a plan for fewer disruptions within their homes.

### **Discussion**

This study's quantitative is unfortunately extremely limited in its sample due to Focus on Youth being a small agency. However, from the data collected, it can be inferred that there is no correlation between gender and behavior-related disruptions at Focus on Youth. Boys and girls disputed from foster placements due to behavior at a proportional rate to their population.

This research's limited scope is also being improved upon by the agency. In January 2021 Focus on Youth updated their disruption logs to include specific reasons for the 30-day notices. Beginning in July, they will be pulling gender, race, and ethnicity data with their reports in order to better grasp how these factors may be affecting disruptions.

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Qualitative data from supervisors provides anecdotal evidence of aggression being a leading cause of behavior-related disruptions, but these behaviors were found in both males and females.

Overall, no data found supports the theory that gender impacts disruptions. It is certainly possible that gender drastically affects foster care disruptions, and a larger-scale study could provide insight on this matter. However, at Focus on Youth, findings suggest there is little to no effect of gender on foster care disruptions.

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