

Grandparent Coresidence and Foster Care Entry over Time: Evidence from the NLSY79 and NLSY97

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Theoretical Background

Over the past few decades, two trends in particular have shaped the growing diversity in children's households: the growth in foster care cases (Swann & Sylvester, 2006) and increasing grandparent coresidence, either in three-generational families or with no parents present (Dunifon, Ziol-Guest, & Kopko, 2014). While several studies analyze how foster care and multigenerational coresidence matter for child development, less research considers the mechanisms that sort children into these arrangements, or how these two trends may be linked.

Adolescent mothers in particular face more parenting, economic, and social stressors that increase the risk of child welfare system involvement (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). However, extended kin in adolescent mothers' households may provide the necessary resources to support healthy child development and maintain family ties (Geronimus, 1997). Furthermore, kinship care represents another possibility for children, in which parents decide to either informally relinquish custody to kin caregivers, or the state intervened to place a child into kinship care due to maltreatment. Grandparent coresidence may facilitate this transfer of custody if grandparents have already established a caregiving role in the family. Thus, the first aim of this manuscript tests the hypothesis that grandparent coresidence will be associated with lower likelihood of a child's entrance into foster care and a greater likelihood of a transition into relative care.

However, several policy changes related to the welfare reform of 1996 may complicate this association between grandparent coresidence and a child's living arrangements. In particular, the new law requires teenage mothers to reside with their own parent(s) (or another "qualified adult") and remain enrolled in high school in order to receive transfer income. Welfare reform may have changed the decision-making calculus by placing additional constraints on families in choosing how to allocate resources and support. If adolescent mothers rely on welfare, but their relationship with their own mother is strained, they may feel that they cannot live with their mother nor can they forgo welfare, thus leading to mother-child separation. Additionally, low-income grandmothers may be less willing to take on the additional role of caregiving for grandchildren when they also must work in order to receive welfare. A reduction in welfare benefits and greater limitations may financially incentivize relative caregivers to enter the formal child welfare system in order to receive greater resources as foster parents than as informal caregivers. Previous research indicates that a loss of welfare benefits, greater work requirements, and more stringent limitations are associated with a greater risk of child protective services involvement (Nam et al. 2006). These studies, however, do not consider the role of potential kin caregivers and either rely on state-level data or data from a single city or state. The second aim of this study thus tests the hypothesis that any association between grandparent coresidence and a child's subsequent living arrangements will be attenuated among the 1997 (post-welfare reform) cohort of mothers as compared to the 1979 (pre-welfare reform) cohort.

Data and Methods

I used the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth 1979, 1979 Child/Young Adult, and 1997 cohorts to create two child-level data files representing all children born to the women in the NLSY79 and NLSY97. The original NLSY79 contributed data about the children's mother and household. I limited the sample to children born to adolescent mothers and excluded children

born before 1984 or 1997, depending on the survey, because limited information was available on the child's household before each survey began (the NLSY79 did not include sufficiently detailed information about a child's residence prior to 1984). These exclusions resulted in a sample of 1,371 children of the NLSY79 mothers and 2,025 children of the NLSY97 mothers. Each dataset was structured in the long format by person years, in which a child became "at risk" of separation the year that they were born. Cases were right-censored when the child either turned sixteen years old or their mother did not complete a survey for two consecutive rounds. Although a child may have experienced multiple spells of separation from their mother, these analyses only model the first separation a child experiences.

The dependent variable indicates whether a child ever leaves their biological mother's household and whether the child goes to live with relatives (e.g., father or grandparents) or in state care (e.g., foster care or adoptive home). Sensitivity analyses confirm results were robust to various operationalizations of kin care (e.g., whether "living with mother part-time and father part-time" was coded as "living in mother's household" or "living with relatives"). Time-varying independent variables included the coresidence of a grandparent, full-time employment (defined as working at least 35 hours per week for more than 40 weeks per year), high school or college enrollment, welfare receipt, and poverty (defined as having an annual household income below the federal poverty line). All time-varying independent variables were lagged by one year to reduce problems due to reverse causality. Non-time-varying independent variables included child's race and sex, mother's age at birth, and mother's marital status at birth.

Because the dependent variable has three categories (never separated, separated via kin care, separated via state care), I used a multinomial discrete-time hazard model with standard errors clustered by mother. Exponentiated coefficients represent relative risk ratios per year. Multiple imputation accounted for within-wave missing data.

Results and Discussion

Out of 1,371 children in the NLSY79, 7.3% exited their mother's household to kin care and 1.3% exited to state care. In the NLSY97, 19% of 2,025 children exited to kin care and 2.32% exited to state care, reflecting the growing diversity in children's households over time.

The first two columns in Table 2 display results based on the NLSY79 cohort only. Grandparent coresidence in the previous year was associated with a 172% greater risk of transitioning to kin care compared to staying in mother's household. Conversely, grandparent coresidence in the previous year was associated with over a 99% reduction in the risk of entering state care, suggesting that grandparents in the household played a role in preventing foster care entrance among children born to teenage mothers between 1984 and 1994.

Results for the NLSY97 cohort, however, differed considerably as shown in the middle two columns of Table 2. Grandparent coresidence in the last year was not significantly associated with entrance into state or kin care. To test if the association between grandparent coresidence and mother-child separation differed across time, I pooled both samples and included an interaction term between cohort and grandparent coresidence. The last two columns display the results for the pooled sample model. The interaction term was indeed significant; Figure 1 plots the associated relative risk ratios to better visualize this change over time. Living with a grandparent in the past year was associated with a 182% increase in the risk of exiting to relative care in the 1979 cohort and a 126% increase in 1997 cohort. Grandparent coresidence in the previous year was associated with over a 99% reduction in the risk of entering state care among the 1979 cohort, but a 126% increase in this risk for the 1997 cohort.

Taken together, these results suggest that grandparent coresidence prevented entrance into state care for children born to teenage mothers before welfare reform, but not post-reform. Although teenage mothers in the later cohort were more likely to live with a grandparent at some point, coresiding grandparents may have been less able to contribute to child care after welfare reform due to increased work requirements. Furthermore, grandparent caregivers may have been incentivized to enter the formal child welfare system, thus more often becoming a child's "adoptive" parents (and coded as entering state care) in the NLSY97 than in the NLSY79. Future research will more fully address potential explanations for this change.

References

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Table 1. Sample Descriptive Statistics, by Cohort and Type of Exit

	Frequency (%) or Mean (Standard Deviation)					
	Never exit		Exit to kin care		Exit to state care	
	1979	1997	1979	1997	1979	1997
Mother's age at birth ^{a, b}	17.56	17.72	17.34	17.39	16.44	17.19
Female	48.20%	49.56%	40.00%	50.13%	61.11%	38.30%
Race/ethnicity ^b						
Black	39.58%	28.75%	45.00%	21.30%	27.78%	6.38%
Hispanic	24.10%	42.25%	21.00%	36.36%	22.22%	38.30%
Non-Hispanic, non-Black	36.31%	1.19%	34.00%	1.30%	50.00%	6.38%
Mixed Race	N/A	27.81%	N/A	41.04%	N/A	48.94%
Grandparent ever in household ^{a, b}	30.89%	60.20%	52.00%	68.31%	44.44%	65.96%
Ever received public assistance ^a	47.81%	33.96%	64.00%	37.14%	72.22%	36.17%
Ever in poverty ^{a, b}	67.34%	78.84%	83.00%	85.64%	94.44%	80.43%
Mother enrolled in high school ^b	3.75%	29.35%	3.00%	31.51%	5.56%	53.19%
Mother enrolled in college ^{a, b}	14.45%	30.16%	6.00%	15.63%	0.00%	21.28%
Mother employed full-time ^{a, b}	66.00%	75.27%	52.00%	50.39%	50.00%	40.43%
Mother's marital status ^{a, b}						
Married biological father	23.89%	24.65%	11.70%	23.24%	0.00%	6.06%
Married social father	31.22%	1.67%	38.30%	1.22%	6.25%	0.00%
Cohabiting biological father	4.53%	24.51%	2.13%	27.22%	0.00%	15.15%
Cohabiting social father	5.60%	2.01%	9.57%	5.50%	12.50%	6.06%
Single	34.76%	47.15%	38.30%	42.81%	81.25%	72.73%
<i>N</i>	1253	1593	100	385	18	47

Note: Significantly different ($p < 0.05$) between types of exits for ^a 1979 cohort and ^b 1997 cohort.

Table 2. Multinomial Hazard Models Predicting Separation from Mother, by Type of Exit and Cohort

	Unstandardized β Coefficient (Standard Error)					
	1979		1997		Combined	
	Kin	State	Kin	State	Kin	State
Grandparent coresidence	1.001*** (0.300)	-15.09*** (0.806)	-0.0883 (0.187)	0.673 (0.419)	1.035*** (0.279)	-13.36*** (0.810)
NLSY97 cohort					0.950*** (0.200)	-0.251 (0.492)
NLSY97 x grandparent					-1.169*** (0.330)	13.94*** (0.921)
Constant	-3.634* (1.535)	-8.837 (7.492)	-1.728 (1.072)	-2.498 (3.861)	-2.952** (0.898)	-0.458 (2.936)
Observations	9,034	9,034	16,003	16,003	25,037	25,037

Models control for child’s race and sex, household’s poverty level and welfare receipt, mother’s age and marital status at birth, high school enrollment, college enrollment, employment status. Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

Figure 1. Relative Risk Ratio of Exiting Mother’s Household Associated with Grandparent Coresidence in the Past Year, by Type of Exit and Cohort

