When Foster Parents Are Kin

by Sandra Beeman and Laura Boisen

Few social services for children are used both as widely and as reluctantly as foster care. Yet it was estimated in 1990* that nearly half a million children were in out-of-home placements across the United States. Many of these children were placed with relatives. For a variety of reasons, kinship foster care—the formal placement of children by a child protection service agency with their relatives or others with close familial ties—is one of the fastest growing types of out-of-home placements for children in need. The growth of kinship foster care is as dramatic in Minnesota as it is across the country. According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, by 1994 approximately 23 percent of the children needing foster care in Minnesota’s metropolitan counties were placed with kin, while just under 10 percent were placed with kin in non-metropolitan counties.

Children are removed from their homes for a variety of reasons. Their parents may no longer be able to care for them. Child abuse or child neglect is often the issue. The child’s own behavior may be causing difficulties that the parents can no longer cope with. Whatever the problem, children often have gone to live with relatives. In fact, the practice of relatives caring for children through informal family arrangements is a long-standing American tradition, but the formal placement of children with kin is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The movement toward a greater reliance on kinship foster care has resulted from new conditions within the overall foster care system. There are increasing numbers of children needing placement and declining numbers of foster families available. Child welfare agencies also have come to more fully recognize kin as placement resources. An emphasis on the importance of a child's racial and ethnic heritage, and the recognition that placement with kin is often less traumatic for the child, have led many child welfare agencies to look first to kin when the need arises. In Minnesota, county social service agencies are required by Minnesota Statute (Section 257-071) to follow an established order of preference in finding an out-of-home placement for a child.

* U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families.

Agencies are required to first try recruiting a foster family from among the child's own relatives.

As the number of children in kinship foster care grows, Minnesota, like many other states, must consider how this kind of care fits within the larger established system for out-of-home child placement—a system based on placement with unrelated foster parents. How does foster care with kin differ from foster care with nonkin? Are the needs of the foster parents different? Is the

When children are placed with kin it is most likely to be with their grandparents. Their birth parents are often involved in selecting which kin they will live with and, in the sample we studied, close to half were already living with kin before formal placement was made.
outcome for the children different? Like most states, Minnesota has needed to respond quickly to the dramatic growth of kinship foster care with policies and procedures for licensing, financial support, and supportive services developed without the benefit of adequate information on the unique issues involved when foster parents are kin. Our study systematically collected data on kinship and nonkinship foster care in Minnesota in order to inform the development of sound policies and programs across the state.

The Kinship Foster Care Study
In order to gather data on a range of county experiences with kinship foster care, we selected three Minnesota counties to participate in our study: an urban county (Hennepin), a suburban county (Anoka), and an outstate county (Blue Earth). Because so little was known about the state of kinship foster care in Minnesota when we began our study, we designed a progressive, multi-phase project. Each phase of data collection used different methods and focused on a different sample of cases.

We began with an analysis of computerized administrative data about all the children in foster care in our three study counties during the first six months of 1994. In all there were 2,820 children in Hennepin County, 574 children in Anoka County, and 80 children in Blue Earth County. In the second phase, we surveyed 381 child welfare professionals about foster care in Hennepin, Anoka, and Blue Earth Counties. Responses were received from 259 child welfare and home licensing workers (68 percent). These are the workers who have the most contact with children placed in foster care and with their families. For the third phase, we selected a sample of fifty kinship and forty-eight nonkinship cases in Anoka and Hennepin Counties for more detailed study through case file reviews.* The sample cases were chosen to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of foster care children in Anoka and Hennepin Counties. In the fourth phase, we conducted interviews with twenty-two kinship and twenty-three nonkinship foster parents, and also with nine birth parents in Hennepin and Anoka Counties.

Patterns of Foster Care Placement
Our analysis of administrative data revealed wide variations among the three study counties in how often children are placed with kin. In Hennepin County more than a third (33.8 percent) of all foster care children were living with kin; in Anoka County, slightly more than 10 percent were with kin, while in Blue Earth County none had been placed with kin (Table 1).

Children of color make up a slightly larger proportion of those living with kin than those with nonkin. In fact, an analysis of administrative data from 1993 showed that children of color—particularly African American and American Indian children—were more likely than White children to be placed with kin for foster care.** When children are placed

Table 1. Race and Hispanic Heritage of Children in Kinship and Nonkinship Foster Care, 1994*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hennepin County</th>
<th></th>
<th>Anoka County</th>
<th></th>
<th>Blue Earth County</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>Non-kinship</td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>Non-kinship</td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>Non-kinship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>60.1 (573)</td>
<td>51.1 (889)</td>
<td>10.3 (6)</td>
<td>6.0 (31)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>1.3 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>18.4 (175)</td>
<td>17.1 (298)</td>
<td>3.4 (2)</td>
<td>4.3 (22)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.5 (5)</td>
<td>2.2 (39)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>0.8 (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>17.4 (166)</td>
<td>26.3 (457)</td>
<td>86.2 (50)</td>
<td>88.9 (458)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>98.8 (79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3.6 (34)</td>
<td>3.2 (56)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Heritage</td>
<td>1.4 (13)</td>
<td>3.5 (60)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>2.7 (14)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100 (953)</td>
<td>100 (1,739)</td>
<td>100 (58)</td>
<td>100 (515)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>100 (80)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Numbers are for the first half of 1994 and represent only those children for whom type of placement was known. Race and Hispanic heritage are two separate variables, thus Hispanic children are counted twice in this table.

Table 2. Race of Children in Case File Review Sample According to Worker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kinship</th>
<th>Nonkinship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>26.0 (13)</td>
<td>29.2 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>14.0 (7)</td>
<td>18.8 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2.0 (1)</td>
<td>2.1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Chicano</td>
<td>4.0 (2)</td>
<td>2.1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36.0 (18)</td>
<td>39.6 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>18.0 (9)</td>
<td>8.3 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0 (50)</td>
<td>100.1 (48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sampling proportions are not equivalent to the distribution of children in foster care (see Table 1). Proportions were first determined for those in kinship homes, then replicated for those in nonkin homes.

Characteristics of Children, Birth Parents, and Foster Parents
Study of individual case files, which included interviews with child welfare and home licensing workers, gave us a closer look at the differences involved when placing children with kin or with nonkin as foster parents. Fifty kinship and forty-eight nonkinship cases were included in the sample. Cases were chosen to highlight the racial and ethnic diversity of children in foster care in Anoka and Hennepin Counties.

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* We were able to collect data from child workers for all fifty kinship and forty-eight nonkinship cases, but from licensing workers (who work with the foster parents) for only thirty-four kinship and forty-two nonkinship cases. Consequently, data related to foster parent characteristics were available for only a portion of our sample. In addition, because the amount of data available in case files varied, even information from child workers was not always complete.

The children in our case sample were predominately White, African American, and American Indian (Table 2). Our sample included more girls in foster care with kin than with nonkin, but the difference was not large (66 percent compared with 50 percent). The children ranged in age from one to seventeen. The average age for children placed with kin was a little over eight years, while for children placed with nonkin it was almost nine years.

Birth parents of children placed with kin were likely to be listed in the case files as mothers rather than fathers or both parents (80 percent compared to 69 percent for children placed with nonkin). The case files, indeed, contained significantly more data about birth mothers than birth fathers, an indication of the child welfare system's intention to birth fathers and their role in child protection issues. Mothers of children placed with kin and nonkin were similar in age and education level. The mean age for mothers whose children were with kin was thirty-two, while for mothers whose children were with nonkin it was thirty-four. Over half of both groups were high school graduates, although information on education was not available for seventeen kin and fourteen nonkin foster parents.

Most birth mothers had low incomes. Whether their children were placed with kin or with nonkin, the majority relied on some form of public assistance. Only a little over a third (37 percent) of the mothers whose children were with kin received some income from employment, while even fewer (28 percent) of the mothers whose children were with nonkin received income from employment.

Birth mothers in both groups were identified as having multiple problems. Alcohol and drug problems were most prevalent among mothers of children in kinship care. Chronic family violence was more often found among mothers of children in nonkinship care. However, even with these identified problems, child welfare workers believed that mothers of children in both groups possessed strengths that could be used in caring for their children. Birth mothers were overwhelmingly seen as committed to the best interests of their children.

Foster parents were also predominately women (98 percent of the foster parents who were kin and 90 percent of the nonkin). Most kin foster parents (primarily grandmothers and aunts) were related to the children's mother. Although other studies have found kin foster parents to be older than nonkin, ours did not. The average age of kin was forty-five and of nonkin, forty-four. The two groups were similar in marital status. In both, the majority were married (56 percent kin and 60 percent of nonkin), with about a quarter divorced (24 percent of kin and 26 percent of nonkin). More kin foster parents were "never married" (15 percent) than nonkin (10 percent).

The two groups of foster parents differed in sources of income. About three-quarters of the foster parents who were kin (76 percent) received income from wages, either from their own employment (55 percent) or from another household member's employment. Almost all of the nonkin (90 percent) received income from wages (57 percent from their own employment). The two groups also differed in their levels of education. Almost a quarter (21 percent) of nonkin foster parents were college graduates while only 6 percent of the kin had completed college.
Placement Characteristics

When children are removed from their birth homes, it may be for any number of reasons. The case files we examined showed that most often these children were removed from their homes for reasons related to their parents—a parent was jailed, or abandoned them, had drug or alcohol problems, or was unable to provide a stable home. Sometimes it was an illness or disability that left the parent incapable of caring for them. This was true for half of the children placed with kin and for almost half (47 percent) of the children placed with nonkin.

A slightly smaller number of children had been removed from their birth homes for “child protection” reasons. These cases involved the risk of sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, or medical neglect. About 40 percent of the children placed with kin and 36 percent of the children placed with nonkin had been removed for these reasons.

However, the majority of cases in both groups included substantiated maltreatment (for 72 percent of the children living with kin and 64 percent of the children living with nonkin). Differences emerge when the type of maltreatment is considered. Child neglect had clearly been more predominant among the children now living with kin (83 percent) than among those living with nonkin (66 percent), while abuse had been more predominant among those now living with nonkin (21 percent versus 9 percent).

A number of things stand out about the placement of children with their kin. Child welfare workers told us that many birth parents had been involved in selecting which kin would serve as foster parents. In fact, close to half of the children in kinship placement (46 percent) were already living in that situation before formal placement was made. In addition, most of the children living with kin whose brothers or sisters were also under the custody of the county (81 percent) were living with their brothers and sisters in the same foster home.

For most of the cases we examined, this was the first time that the child had been moved from home for an episode of care with foster parents. And, indeed, the goal for the majority of the cases we studied was eventual reunification with the birth parents. There were differences, however, between children living with kin and with nonkin in how many placements the children had experienced during the current episode of care. For children living with kin the median number of prior placements was none, their only placement had been with these kin. For children living with nonkin, the median number of prior placements was two. This alone speaks to the stability that placement with kin offers children.

The Children's Well-Being

How were the children doing in their out-of-home placements? We asked the family workers for their perceptions of the children's well-being. Most were in generally good health and were receiving regular physical and dental checkups (Figure 1). There were differences between those placed with kin and with nonkin, however, when it came to their mental health. While we were told that about half of the children placed with kin (52 percent) had generally good mental health, workers said that less than a third of those placed with nonkin (30 percent) did, and the proportion of those with serious ongoing mental health problems was much higher among children living with nonkin (23 percent) than among those living with kin (6 percent).

Children's school adjustment also differed between those living with kin and those living with nonkin. The workers told us that well over half of the children living with kin (60 percent) were adjusting well to school, while only 42 percent of those living with nonkin were. In addition almost a third of the children living with nonkin (31 percent) had chronic behavioral and academic problems. Only 13 percent of those living with kin had such severe problems.

While most of the children in the cases we studied did not have either learning or developmental disabilities, many of the children in nonkinship homes had emotional and behavioral problems (80 percent). Children in kinship homes were much less likely to have emotional and behavioral problems (38 percent). Overall, the majority of the children in both types of placement (77 percent of kin and 88 percent of nonkin) were adjusting positively to their placement, according to their workers.

Services, Training, and Support

Children in foster care received regular visits or phone calls from their family workers twice each month whether they had been placed with kin or nonkin. In addition to regular casework services, many had received psychological services during placement (50 percent of those with kin and 63 percent of those with nonkin). Some children had also received educational services (18 percent with kin, 25 percent with nonkin) as well as medical services (12 percent with kin, 19 percent with nonkin).

Birth mothers also had regular contact with their family workers, four times each month, whether their children were placed with kin or nonkin. Other services were also available to birth mothers. Psychological services were used by 84 percent of the mothers whose children had been placed with kin and by 77 percent of the mothers whose children had been placed with nonkin. Training and support services were used by over half (54 percent) of both groups of birth mothers.

When we examined support, services, and training for foster parents we found significant differences between those who
were kin and those who were nonkin. The majority of kin foster parents had restricted licenses—they were licensed only to provide foster care for their kin. Less than a third (29 percent) had received training before the child was placed with them (as compared to 100 percent of nonkin foster parents). Foster care payments to the kin were markedly lower as well. The mean monthly payment to foster parents who were kin was $618 compared to $834 for nonkin. Family workers had significantly less contact with foster parents who were kin during the child’s placement and the types of service received during the placement differed greatly (Figure 2). Both types of parents did receive training during the child’s placement and licensing workers told us that they did not believe that foster parents who were kin were more in need of further training than those who were nonkin.

Progress and Outcome

For children placed in both kinship and nonkinship foster care, child welfare agency goals are to obtain a safe and permanent living arrangement for the child in their charge, and if possible, to reunify the child with his or her birth parents. In most cases (70 percent kin and 64 percent nonkin), satisfactory progress was being made toward these goals. Because the goal for most of these children was reunification, we asked about the relationship between foster parents and birth parents.

Again, we found significant differences. Family workers believed there were problems between birth mothers and foster parents who were kin that were not as evident when the foster parents were nonkin. Among the nonkin foster parents, family workers said the birth mother and foster parent either got along very well (36 percent) or did not have much interaction (27 percent). The workers had no knowledge about the relationship in fifteen cases. With the kin, however, they found that birth mothers and foster parents had some interpersonal issues (41 percent) or did not get along very well (22 percent). Licensing workers reported similar discrepancies.

What was the outcome for children placed with foster parents? Of the children whose placement ended during the interview phase of our study,* 84 percent of those placed with kin had returned home, while only 49 percent of the children placed with nonkin had done so. Children who had not been placed with kin were more likely to have moved to another placement or been adopted or emancipated. There were no significant differences in the length of placement or the overall length of time in out-of-home care for children in the two types of placement. Children placed with kin averaged only one placement during their episode of care compared with two placements for those with nonkin.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In comparing the long established system of foster care with the rapidly growing practice of placing children with their kin as foster parents, we discovered some significant differences. Foster parents who were not kin were more highly educated and more likely to receive income from employment. They received more foster-care training, and more money for their role as foster parents. Children placed under their care were more likely to have been physically abused or neglected, were more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, and were more likely to move on to another foster care situation than return home.

Foster parents who were kin were less educated and received less money from wages. They also received less money for their foster care role, fewer services, and less training as foster parents. The children under their care had suffered more from neglect than from physical abuse. The children tended to have better mental health and a better adjustment to school. In addition, their placements were more stable. They were more likely to have only this one placement, and they were more likely to return home after their episode of care with relatives, despite the tensions that were often observed between birth mothers and kin foster parents.

As kinship foster care becomes an established part of the foster care system, policy and practice must be changed to accommodate this unique form of out-of-home care. The results of our study led us to make several recommendations about what types of changes are needed. Overall, we recommend improvements in data collection and coordination across county and state lines. Payment disparities need to be addressed and changes are clearly called for in the services, support, and training available to foster parents who are kin.

We recommend that the state improve its data collection efforts at both the state and county levels. Improved data collection will make it possible to track children across episodes of out-of-home care. Kinship and nonkinship foster care needs to be clearly specified along with data about the birth and foster parents. The use of kin in foster care currently varies widely across the state, as was evident in our three county samples. More accurate data will allow for more carefully tracking and understanding of these variations. Because placement with kin often involves more than one county or even more than one state, policy changes

* Twenty-two children in kinship care and twenty-four children in nonkinship care.
that facilitate communication and coordination between county and state agencies are needed. Better case coordination is in the interest of the state, the welfare agencies, the foster parents, and the children.

The current payment disparities among family support assistance, foster care payments, and adoption subsidies (the three sources of financing that support children living with kin) serve as a disincentive for kin becoming legal guardians or adoptive parents. Minnesota needs to explore some of the alternative payment structures (such as subsidized guardianship) used to support kin foster parents in other states. In addition, disparities between payments given to kin and nonkin based on difficulty of care needs to be carefully examined. A better payment structure would not only correct current inequities, but also add to the ways in which the state can provide stability for troubled children.

Improved integration of services, support, and training is also needed for foster parents. Since kin foster parents typically do not view themselves as “professionals,” they may need additional help in learning to negotiate the system of services available to their foster children and themselves. Training specific to the needs of foster parents who are kin is needed. In addition, we suggest the development of support groups specifically for kin foster parents. Finally, we believe that family workers also need to be trained to recognize and respond to the unique issues involved with kin foster parents so that they can provide appropriate supervision and monitoring of kinship placements.

Kinship foster care has the potential to be an effective and successful type of out-of-home placement option for children in need. However, its use must be guided by sound policy and practice designed specifically for the unique needs of kinship foster parents and their foster children. The findings of our study are being used by the Minnesota Department of Human Services to develop a responsive framework for kinship foster care policy and practice in Minnesota.

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Sandra Beeman is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota and a research associate in the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. She conducts research on child abuse and neglect, children in foster care, and the overlap of child maltreatment and violence against women. Laura Boisen is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work and an assistant professor at Augsburg College. Laura was a research assistant on this project and is completing her dissertation based on interviews with kinship foster parents. This article summarizes some of the findings from their study (with Esther Wattenberg and Susan Bullerdick) Kinship Foster Care in Minnesota. To receive a copy of the full report, contact the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, School of Social Work, 400 Ford Hall, 224 Church St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 (612/626-8202).

This study was supported by grants from the Minnesota Department of Human Services and an interactive research grant from CURA and the Office of the Vice President for Research, University of Minnesota. Interactive research grants have been created to encourage University faculty to carry out research projects that involve significant issues of public policy for the state and that include interaction with community groups, agencies, or organizations in Minnesota. These grants are available to regular faculty members at the University of Minnesota and are awarded annually on a competitive basis.

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**Child Maltreatment**

How wide spread is child abuse in Minnesota? What type of abuse is most prevalent? A special study on child maltreatment in Minnesota from 1991 through 1994 has just been published by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. Based on county statistics provided to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the study examined types of maltreatment, age and race or ethnicity of abused children, maltreatment in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area, and how the Minnesota data compares with the rest of the United States.

The most striking finding was that almost half of Minnesota’s abused children are six or younger, and that infants and toddlers are the largest share of this group of abused children. Copies of the study results—A Report on Child Maltreatment, The State of Minnesota, 1991-1994 by Esther Wattenberg and Hyungmo Kim—are available from the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. Copies may be requested by phone through Sharon Haas, 612/624-1383.