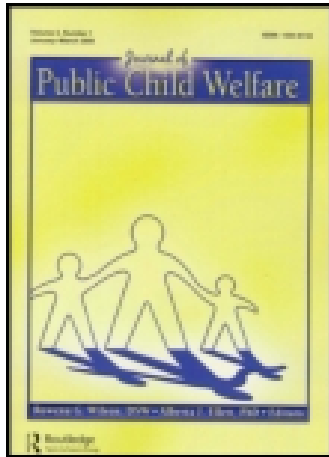


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### Post-Permanency Continuity: What Happens After Adoption and Guardianship From Foster Care?

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## **Post-Permanency Continuity: What Happens After Adoption and Guardianship From Foster Care?**

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*A new dynamic faces the U.S. child welfare system. Since 1998 there has been a simultaneous decrease in children in state custody and increase in children in subsidized adoptive and guardianship homes. In 2013 there were 2.8 children in federally assisted adoptive or guardianship homes for every child in a federally assisted foster home. While generally lauded as positive, little empirical research chronicles the post-adoption or post-guardianship outcomes of these children, and there is no agreed-upon terminology for children who leave their legally permanent homes prior to becoming adults. This study examined outcomes for 21,629 children adopted or taken into guardianship, and tracked for at least 10 years, or until age 18. Most (87%) did not reenter foster care or experienced another type of temporary or long-term interruption in care. Based on the experiences of the 13%, this study suggests new terminology, post-permanency discontinuity, to describe these experiences.*

*KEYWORDS* adoption, policy issues, permanency/concurrent planning, foster care, relative/kinship care

In child welfare literature and in practice little is known about the post-permanency outcomes of children who have transitioned from state custody through adoption or guardianship. For children who leave their legally permanent homes prior to becoming adults, there is no agreed-upon

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terminology for describing these situations. Previous terminology includes *disruption*, *dissolution*, *displacement* and *post-adoption placement*, yet none of these terms fully capture the experiences. This research used administrative data to track 21,629 children in adoptive or guardianship homes and suggests a new term—*post-permanency discontinuity*—to describe situations in which children leave their homes after adoption or guardianship, prior to becoming an adult.

Federal policies and guidance have stressed the importance of achieving legal permanence for children who come into state custody (e.g., Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997; Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA) of 2008). Together these changes reflect a new dynamic facing the U.S. child welfare system: the number of children living in state custody has substantially decreased, and the number of children living in state subsidized adoptive and guardianship homes has substantially increased. Nationally the total number of children living in foster care has decreased from a peak of 560,000 children in care in 1998 to 402,000 in 2013. Of these totals, slightly more than 50% (305,000) were recipients of IV-E foster care assistance in 1998 and 40% (159,000) were IV-E recipients in 2013 (Committee on Ways and Means of the U.S. House of Representatives [CWM], 2014). During this same period, the average monthly number of children living in IV-E assisted homes with adoptive parents and (since 2009) kin guardians has climbed from 168,000 in 1998 to 449,000 in 2013 (CWM, 2014). Currently, there are 2.8 children in federally assisted permanent homes for every one child in federally assisted foster homes.

While generally lauded as a positive improvement, little empirical research chronicles the long-term outcomes for these children and their families. Specifically, the critical question is whether legally permanent families are established through adoption or guardianship from foster care truly lasting homes or does a “rush to permanence” (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Gendell, 2001) eventually result in thousands of children reentering foster care. This research begins to answer that question through an analysis of the administrative data records of 21,629 children who exited foster care in the state of Illinois through adoption or guardianship between 1998 and 2002. These children were tracked through the end of 2012, or the age of majority, whichever came first.

A recent review by the Children’s Bureau found that little is known about the long-term outcomes of these children and their families. One difficulty in tracking these children is that their names and social security numbers often change after adoption and child welfare systems deliberately do not link pre- and post-adoption identities (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). In addition, in some states no historical data are maintained regarding adoption subsidies, as new information is entered into the data system and old data is deleted or overwritten (Barth, Wildfire, Lee, & Gibbs, 2002). The federal government estimates that between 1% and 10% of adoptions result in children returning to state custody and has called for additional research that identifies the

rate of adoption dissolution; risk and protective factors associated with post-adoption stability; and studies that illuminate why some adoptions intended to last forever end prematurely (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Subsidized guardianship is even less studied than adoption; it only became available to all states after the passage of the FCA in 2008.

## BACKGROUND

Before understanding what occurs post-adoption or post-guardianship, a quick review of the terminology in use is suggested. This review is followed by a discussion of new terminology resulting from the findings of this study. Finally, a review of the relevant literature related to the continuity of care after adoption and guardianship is finalized is presented.

### Previous Terminology

In the literature and in practice, there is no consistent terminology to describe the circumstances in which children leave their homes after adoption and guardianship prior to becoming adults. Previous terminology includes *disruption*, *dissolution*, *displacement*, and *post-adoption placement*; each of these which will be briefly discussed.

- *Disruption* has evolved to describe the situation in which a child is placed in a home that is intended to become the child's adoptive home, but the placement ends prior to the finalization of the adoption (Barth, Gibbs, and Siebenaler, 2001; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Rosenthal, 1993; Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006).
- *Dissolution* describes the situation in which a guardianship is vacated or adoptive parent(s) rights are terminated for a reason other than the death or incapacitation of guardian or adoptive parent (Festinger, 2002; Festinger & Maza, 2009; McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001).
- *Displacement* describes the situation in which a child is no longer in the physical care of his or her guardian(s) or adoptive parent(s), but guardianship or parental rights remain intact (Goerge, Howard, Yu, & Radomsky, 1997).
- *Post-adoption placement* has been suggested as an alternative to *displacement*. Festinger and Maza (2009) argue that the term *displacement* has negative connotations and the term *post-adoption placement* is a more neutral term. They found that the majority (61%) of the children who reenter state custody after adoption do so to receive necessary services. They ask why the children of adoptive parents who seek assistance are labeled *displaced* whereas children whose birth parents seek similar services are not labeled *displaced*.

This study uses *post-permanency discontinuity*<sup>1</sup> to describe the circumstances under which children leave their homes after adoption or guardianship prior to becoming adults. The term *adoption disruption* has been primarily used to describe pre-adoptive placements that end prior to the finalization of the adoption. Because it is unclear how well previous findings about adoption disruptions generalize to post-permanency placements, it is important to explore what occurs after adoption and legal guardianship are finalized. *Dissolution*, *displacement*, and *post-adoption placement* are terms that are most closely aligned with the purpose of this study, yet they do not fully describe the post-permanency experience. As will be detailed in the results section, not all circumstances in which children leave their homes after adoption and guardianship result in a foster care placement, and the legal status of parental rights is not always clear. This broad definition of post-permanency discontinuity is used to understand the situation of *any* child who leaves their home after legal permanence and prior to adulthood. This would include, for instance, a child who is placed temporarily in state custody and remains in contact with her adoptive parents while in state custody. *Discontinuity* has been defined broadly, and should not be construed as a negative outcome for all children. As will be discussed in this article, patterns of discontinuity vary and responses to supporting and providing services to families who are experiencing discontinuity should also vary. *Post-permanency discontinuity* is broad enough to encompass the variety of situations that occur for these children after adoption or guardianship. Children who have no record of reentry into foster care, and whose subsidy payment continues through the age of majority, will be referred to as having experienced *post-permanency continuity*.

### Literature on Post-Permanency Discontinuity

Little research examines the stability of the caregiving relationship once legal permanence has been attained through adoption or guardianship after state custody and the research that does exist relates to discontinuity after adoption. This research has found that most adoptive parents report that their adopted children are doing well, and the families report satisfaction with the adoption (Festinger, 2002; Fuller et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2001; Testa, Rolock, Liao, & Cohen, 2010). Best estimates suggest that between 1% and 10% of adoptive placements end in dissolution (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012), but many of these studies have been conducted with small samples, and there has been inconsistency in the definition of dissolution or displacement.

A study of a randomly selected 516 children adopted (at a mean age of 7.9 years) from out-of-home care in New York found that 4 years after adoption, about 3% of children subsequently reentered substitute care (Festinger, 2002). In most of these situations, the adoptive parent reported an expectation that the child would return to the adoptive home again, and that services to these

families after adoption were important in promoting stability. Similarly, a study of 159 adoptive parents in Kansas, whose adopted children had a mean age of 7.7, found that 18 to 24 months after adopting foster children, 97% of the families reported that the child was still living in the adoptive parents' home (McDonald et al., 2001). In addition, a study of families of children discharged to adoption or guardianship in Illinois found that 10 years post-discharge, 90% of children who transitioned from state custody through adoption, and 85% of children who transitioned from state custody through subsidized guardianships experienced caregiver continuity (Rolock, 2009). This study used a definition of discontinuity to include (a) children who reentered substitute care, and (b) children whose adoption or guardianship state subsidy payment ended prior to the child's 18th birthday. The study did not distinguish between these types of post-permanency discontinuity. A second Illinois study that was limited to a randomly selected group of 438 caregivers of children who have transitioned from state custody through adoption or guardianship in the Chicago area age 12 to 17 years found that an estimated 4% to 5% of the population reentered state custody or experienced early termination of an adoption or guardianship subsidy (Testa et al., 2010).

Another study utilized national data ( $N = 3,166$ ) and focused on what occurred after adoption with a population of children who reentered state custody after an adoption (Festinger & Maza, 2009). The authors first determined which of the children who reentered state custody after adoption experienced *adoption dissolution*, defined as the termination of parental rights for at least one adoptive parent. They found that the majority (61%) of the adoptions were not dissolved. In addition, 59% of these children were reunified with their adoptive parents and 22% emancipated from care. For children whose adoptions were dissolved, most (87%) were adopted a second time. The work of Festinger and Maza (2009) highlights the need to better understand, and develop accurate language for, what occurs with families after adoption or guardianship.

While limited research is available that examines post-finalization stability for children who have transitioned from state custody to adoption, even less is known about stability after guardianship finalization due to the relatively short amount of time that subsidized guardianship has been available as a permanency resource. However, the evaluation of five states that implemented federal guardianship waiver demonstration projects found low rates of placement disruption overall (between 1% and 3%), and the differences between those who were offered the option of guardianship (the experimental group) and those whose only option was adoption (the control group) were not statistically significant (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Research into the reasons for instability after guardianship in Chicago, Illinois, found that of the 673 children who had experienced instability after subsidized guardianship, 41% reentered state custody as a result of their caregiver's death; 36% reentered for unknown reasons; 18% were

reunited with their birth family; and 5% were appointed a new guardian (Rolock & Testa, 2007).

While there is consistency in the finding that most families did not experience discontinuity, the cumulative number of children who transitioned from state custody through adoption or guardianship has increased significantly over the past 20 years. As such, an increasing number of families have experienced discontinuity, even though the rate has remained constant, and the impact on each child and family is important. Reports commissioned by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012; Barth et al., 2001) called for additional research to better understand the number of children and families who have experienced discontinuity in caregivers, and the links between pre- and post-permanency services, rates of discontinuity, and the causes of discontinuity.

### Background on Illinois

A brief overview of child welfare caseload dynamics, practice, and policy in Illinois will provide a backdrop for this study. The number of children in subsidized adoptive or guardianship homes in Illinois increased from approximately 4,000 children in 1987 to approximately 38,000 children in 2010. In Illinois this increase is tied to changes in state practices and policies aimed at addressing children in foster care for many years, many of whom were living with relatives. A quick overview of these changes will provide a context for understanding the permanency dynamics within the state, and how Illinois is on the forefront of what many other states might expect to see as a result of implementing the guardianship provisions of FCA and any additional changes in state policies and procedures.

Similar to the national child welfare data, Illinois witnessed a dramatic shift in the number of children living in state custody, with decreasing numbers of children in foster care and an increasing number of children in subsidized adoptive or guardianship homes. In 1996 there were a record high number of children in state custody. The state witnessed a 240% increase in numbers of children in foster care between 1987 and 1997—from 15,000 to 51,000 children. In response to this large increase in the foster care population, and prior to the national ASFA legislation, Illinois implemented policy changes aimed at reducing the foster care caseload by decreasing the number of children who entered state custody and increasing the number of children who left state custody. These policies included the Home of Relative Reform (HMR Reform), Performance Contracting, and the Subsidized Guardianship Waiver Demonstration (Testa, 2006; 2010).

HMR Reform redefined what constituted child neglect in Illinois, and changed licensing requirements for children living with kin. Children living with relatives at the time of a report to the child welfare system were no longer taken

into state custody if the children appeared to be safe and the relatives were willing to continue to care for them. The next major policy change, Performance Contracting, realigned financial incentives so that permanent placement was prioritized over long term foster care. Essentially, this meant that the private child welfare agencies providing care (and receiving state reimbursement for that care) were provided financial incentives when children transitioned from state custody to a permanent home and disincentives when they failed to meet their state defined permanency targets. Finally, the Subsidized Guardianship program implemented under IV-E waiver authority provided an additional permanency option to families. Like subsidized adoption, which has been included in federal law since 1980, subsidized guardianship provides caregivers with a monthly stipend to provide for the children in their care. These initiatives collectively resulted in an increased number of children transitioning from state custody to adoptive or guardianship arrangements in subsequent years.

In 2000, Illinois reached a milestone with more former foster children living outside the foster care system and receiving adoption or guardianship subsidies than there were children in foster care. The number of children in subsidized adoptive or guardianship homes steadily increased from approximately 4,000 children in 1987 to approximately 35,000 children in 2011. Subsidized guardianship was introduced in Illinois as an IV-E waiver demonstration project in 1997. In Illinois the adoption and guardianship subsidies are identical to the level of subsidy received by a licensed foster parent if the child remained in state custody. Requirements for qualifying for a subsidy in Illinois include one of the following: an irreversible or non-correctable physical, mental or emotional disability; the child is age 1 year or older; the child is a member of a sibling group being adopted together; or the prospective adoptive parents have previously adopted, with adoption assistance, another child born of the same mother or father. Most children (86%) were eligible for a subsidy (Fuller et al., 2006).

Illinois provides a relatively unique opportunity to examine this issue. The child welfare department, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS), has funded several post-permanency studies that examined the needs and services of families after adoption and guardianship. In most states, child welfare agency personnel are not able to track children once they have left state custody. However, IDCFS has that ability to link foster and adoption identities, allowing outcomes to be tracked longitudinally.

## METHODS

### Data Sources

The Integrated Database (IDB) is a longitudinal relational database that relies on probabilistic record linkage to match child records across IDCFS administrative data systems. These data are collected for all children involved

with the IDCFS, and compiled and maintained by Chapin Hall. For children adopted through IDCFS, their names and identifying information often change during the transition from state custody to adoption. For most of these youth, IDCFS provided a supplementary data file that links foster and adoption case identification numbers, this file was linked to the IDB. Linking was not required for children who transition to guardianship; their names and identities do not typically change.

## Population

The population included all children ( $N = 22,563$ ) who had been adopted or taken into legal guardianship in Illinois between fiscal years 1998 and 2002, had an open adoption or guardianship assistance as of June 30, 2005, and were between the ages of 6 and 17 years on June 30, 2006. These restrictions excluded 904 children who had also been adopted or taken into guardianship during this same period but who were no longer living in the home, or whose subsidy had ended, as of June 30, 2005. In addition, 30 children died after their adoption or transfer of guardianship and were omitted from the study. Unlike most of the studies that track outcomes for children after adoption or guardianship, this study was able to track children for a minimum of 10 years, or through the age of majority. Outcomes for these 21,629 children were tracked through December 31, 2012, using IDCFS administrative data.

## Long-Term Outcome

The long-term outcome used in this study was continuity or discontinuity in caregivers. Tracking of this outcome required three steps:

- The adoption link file was employed to identify the records of children who have been adopted through IDCFS.
- A program written in SAS (SAS Institute, Cary, NC) queried the administrative data for children who reentered foster care and for children whose adoptive or guardianship subsidy payment ended prior to the child reaching the age of majority, using both the pre- and post-adoption identities of children.
- A re-examination of the administrative data to code patterns of discontinuity for the 1,686 children who reentered state custody; this coding was done by hand. (No additional information was available for children whose subsidy ended prior to the age of majority).

## LINKING RECORDS

For children who transitioned to guardianship, tracking reentries into substitute care was a fairly straightforward process. Standard protocol is that when a child reenters state custody from guardianship, the same ID number is used.

However children who transitioned to adoption are provided a new ID, their social security number and sometimes names change. If a child reenters foster care from an adoptive home, the child may reenter under the ID associated with her or his foster care status or adoption status. This causes difficulty when trying to use administrative data to ascertain the rate of reentry. IDCFS maintains a file which links pre- and post-adoptive child welfare identification numbers, however, it is not a perfect match between the two identifiers, and not all children appear in the link file. In this study successful matches were made with 99% of children who transitioned through adoption.

#### TRACKING LONGITUDINAL OUTCOMES

Children were tracked through the administrative data to determine if they reentered foster care, or if their adoption or guardianship subsidy payment ended prior to the child reaching the age of majority. Tracking involved examining the administrative data for records indicating a placement after the initial permanency date. Children who reentered state custody and had any placement type that lasted more than 7 days were coded as having reentered. The 7-day restriction was used to clean up what appears to be administrative changes rather than actual placements for children.

The administrative data were also used to track the premature ending of an adoption or guardianship subsidy payment. Subsidies are provided through the age of majority, and can follow a family if they move out of state. While families are not required to accept a subsidy, the majority of families who adopt or assume subsidized guardianship of children from foster care in Illinois receive a subsidy (Fuller et al., 2006). When the subsidy payment is discontinued there is no indication in the administrative data as to why the subsidy ended. Children could have moved out of state with no forwarding address, moved to the home of a different caregiver, or left the home for a variety of reasons. It is possible that the move was planned and would not be assessed by the youth or the caregiver as instability. Counting these placements as unstable may be over-estimating the discontinuity rate. It is also plausible that some youth left the placement, and this has not been reported to IDCFS, a potential undercount of the incident of discontinuity. The tracking of the subsidy payment data followed youth through the age of 17.75 years to account for the processing dates associated with termination of a payment when the child reached age 18 years. Acknowledging these limitations, any premature discontinuation of a subsidy payment was defined as discontinuity in this study.

#### CODING DISCONTINUITY

Codes to describe the post-permanency experience for children who reentered substitute care were developed by the author and verified by a second

researcher. Rolock created the codes by going through each administrative record and examining the patterns of placement for children who reentered care. Rolock then recorded the observed patterns and developed preliminary schemes for understanding the patterns. After examining all records, the preliminary codes were then collapsed into fewer categories with similar patterns. A second researcher went through the same data and coded the data using the pre-determined codes, and the two sets of codes were compared. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed until consensus was reached. Codes are described in the results section.

#### DESCRIPTIVE DATA

This is a descriptive study, providing a longitudinal examination of a population where little information exists. Data were examined through univariate and bivariate tables. Tests of statistical significance were not conducted, and inferences should not be drawn about causality. Tests of statistical significance are used to assess evidence of the probability of sampling error (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). These data do not represent a sample, rather are population data (all children in Illinois who exited state custody through adoption or guardianship during a specific time frame), and assessed based on practical significance rather than statistical significance (Fortune & Reid, 1999). Furthermore, given the large number of cases assessed, any minor differences or associations are likely to be statically significant yet may not have theoretical or practical significance. For example, a one percentage point difference in the rate of discontinuity between adoption and guardianship would result in a statistically significant difference, yet not a practically significant difference.

#### RESULTS

This study found, similar to other studies, that the vast majority (87%) of children who exited state custody through adoption or guardianship in Illinois experienced post-permanency continuity. Yet, a substantial number of children and their families ( $N = 2,720$ ; 13%) experienced discontinuity; this section will focus on the outcomes for the 13%. The administrative record for each child who experienced discontinuity was examined and types of discontinuity were established. Table 1 shows the prevalence of each type of discontinuity and case examples (using pseudonyms) are provided below to further illuminate these differences. As each type of discontinuity is described, the number of children who have experienced the death of a caregiver is also reported. Although it is recorded that a caregiver is deceased, the date of the death is not reported, and therefore the sequencing of events, and causality, cannot be determined.

**TABLE 1** Bivariate Results: Post-Permanency Discontinuity Outcomes

Measure	No discontinuity	Paper changes	Returned to caregiver	Intensive services	Traditional or kinship	Short-term	Subsidy ended
Adoption	88%	6%	3%	21%	24%	8%	38%
% (N)	16,513	124	64	462	517	165	819
Guardianship	81%	11%	1%	19%	29%	2%	38%
% (N)	2,396	64	5	109	165	11	215
Non-Kin	89%	9%	5%	29%	20%	3%	35%
% (N)	8,961	92	50	306	213	34	375
Kinship	86%	6%	1%	16%	28%	9%	40%
%(N)	9,948	96	19	265	469	142	659
Black	87%	6%	2%	20%	27%	7%	37%
% (N)	14,776	148	49	464	607	169	841
Hispanic	91%	12%	4%	20%	16%	2%	46%
% (N)	922	11	4	19	15	2	43
Other	89%	6%	3%	25%	19%	0%	47%
% (N)	298	2	1	9	7	0	17
White	90%	9%	5%	25%	17%	2%	43%
% (N)	2,913	27	15	79	53	5	133
Female	87%	6%	2%	20%	25%	7%	40%
% (N)	9,461	90	29	274	344	95	565
Male	88%	7%	3%	22%	26%	6%	35%
%(N)	9,448	98	40	297	338	81	469
Age at permanence	5.7	6.1	5.1	6.1	5.7	5.7	5.5
<i>M (SD)</i>	2.6	(2.6)	(2.4)	(2.3)	(2.5)	(2.4)	(2.5)
Duration of permanence	—	6.6	8.1	8.9	7.8	6.8	8.9
<i>M (SD)</i>	—	(3.1)	(3.1)	(2.5)	(2.4)	(2.3)	(2.7)
Age at discontinuity	—	12.8	13.1	15.0	13.4	12.5	14.5
<i>(SD)</i>	—	(3.4)	(2.8)	(1.9)	(2.7)	(2.9)	(2.4)
Total	87%	7%	3%	21%	25%	6%	38%
<i>N</i> = 21,629	18,909	188	69	571	682	176	1,034

### Change in Caregiver, No Time in State Custody (Paper Changes), $N = 188$

This group comprises individuals who transferred to the custody of new adoptive parent or legal guardian, but spent no time in state custody after legal permanence; they ended and started a new adoption or guardianship the same day. These cases were flagged due to a change in the caregiver's social security number. However, it is unclear that the child ever changed where he or she lived, if parental rights were ever terminated, or if the two social security numbers are associated with members of the same family. Of the 188 children whose experiences fall into this category, almost one-third (27%;  $N = 51$ ) also experienced the death of at least one caregiver.

Slightly fewer post-adoption discontinuities (6%) were due to paper changes, compared to 11% of post-guardianship discontinuities. Fewer paper changes occurred among children living with non-relative compared to relative caregivers (9% and 6%, respectively). Fewer of these discontinuities were observed among Black (6%) and White (9%) children than Hispanic children (12%). Similar rates were observed by gender (6% female; 7% of males). Examples of paper changes include the following cases:

At age 10 years, Samuel was adopted by a relative where he lived for 2 months. He then transferred to the custody of a new adoptive parent where he lived for 6 years. He was then adopted by his original caregiver where he lived until he reached the age of majority. He did not spend any time in custody between any of these transfers of custody.

Joan was adopted by a relative at age 4 years and remained with her adoptive parents for 7 years. At age 11 years, she transitioned to subsidized guardianship with a different relative, and 4 years later she was transferred to a new guardian at age 15 years. Her original adoptive parent died.

### Returned to Caregiver, $N = 69$

This group of children reentered state custody and then returned to the care of their original adoptive parent or legal guardian. Since the number in this category was small, little differences were seen among the demographic breakouts, for example:

At age 8 years, Toni exited state custody to live with her legal guardian, a relative. She lived there for 8 years, and then, at age 16 years, came back into state custody, lived with a different relative for 3 months, an institutional placement for 2 months, back to her original guardian for 1.5 months, went to live with a different relative for 1 month, then back to her original guardian where she lived for almost 4 months before the subsidized guardianship was reinstated.

At age 9 years, Jerimah was adopted by non-relatives. He lived with his adoptive parents for just over 5 years. At age 14 years, he reentered state

custody, spending 6 months in a traditional foster home, he then returned to his adoptive parents until he reached the age of majority.

### Reentered State Custody, Predominately in Intensive Service Placements, $N = 571$

These children reentered state custody and spent their time predominately in the following types of placement settings: detention, group home, institutions, runaway and specialized foster care. Many of these children (73%) had at least one adoptive parent or legal guardian who died. Similar rates of post-adoption (21%) and post-guardianship (19%) discontinuities were observed. More of these children lived with non-related caregivers than relative caregivers (29% and 16%, respectively). The proportion by race was: 20% among Black and Hispanic children and 25% among White children and children of other races or ethnicities. Similar rates were observed by gender (20% female; 22% of males). Examples of these cases are:

Rosa was adopted by non-relatives at age 4 years. She lived with her adoptive parents for 11 years, at age 15 years she reentered state custody, living in institutions, hospitalizations, group homes, detention and in temporary living placements for the next 4 years. According to the most recent data, she is still in state custody.

Jack was adopted by relatives at age 5 years. He lived with his adoptive parents for 6 years. At age 11 years, he reentered state custody and spent a few weeks in detention, another few weeks in a group home, followed by 5 months in a traditional foster care home. The next 2 years he spent in institutions or in detention and had one runaway episode.

### Reentered State Custody, Predominately in Traditional and Kinship Foster Care, $N = 682$

Children in this grouping reentered state custody and lived primarily in kinship care and traditional foster care. A large proportion of these children had at least one adoptive parent or legal guardian who died (70%;  $N = 478$ ). Similar rates of discontinuity were observed among children who exited through adoption versus guardianship (24% and 29%, respectively). Fewer discontinuities occurred among children living with non-related caregivers than relative caregivers (20% and 28%, respectively). The proportion by race was: 27% among Black children, 16% of Hispanic children, 17% among White children, and 19% of children of other races or ethnicities. Similar rates were observed by gender (25% female and 26% male). Examples include:

Madison was adopted by non-relatives at age 8 years and lived with her adoptive parents for 9 years. At 17 years, she reentered state custody.

During the next year, she lived primarily with one traditional foster parent, although her year in this placement was scattered with periods of running away. At the end of the year, she aged out of foster care.

At age 7 years, Cheryl was adopted by relatives. She lived with her adoptive parents for 2.5 years. At age 10 years, she reentered state custody and spent 10 months in custody with foster parents who eventually became her legal guardians.

### Short-Term Foster Care, $N = 176$

These children reentered state custody for less than 1 year, and were predominately in kinship and traditional foster care arrangements. Most children ( $N = 154$ ; 88%) had an adoptive parent or legal guardian who died. Short-term discontinuity occurred more frequently among children who had been adopted (8%) versus guardianship (2%). A smaller proportion occurred among children living with non-related caregivers than relative caregivers (3% versus 9%, respectively). The proportion by race was: 7% of Black children, 2% of Hispanic children, 2% among White children, and none of the children of other races or ethnicities. Similar rates were observed by gender (7% female, 6% male). Examples include:

Jordan exited state custody through subsidized guardianship at age 7 years. At age 17 years, she reentered state custody and spent 4 months in a pre-adoptive traditional foster home. Jordan had a caregiver who is deceased, and this event may have been related to her reentry.

At age 7 years, Gabriella was adopted by non-relatives. She lived with her adoptive parents until the age of 12 years, just over 5 years. She then reentered state custody for 7 months when she was adopted by a new family.

### Subsidy Ended Prematurely, No Reentry, $N = 1,034$

Caregivers of children who were adopted or transitioned from state custody through guardianship in Illinois are eligible to receive a state subsidy for the child they are caring for through the age of majority. The administrative data shows that sometimes these subsidy payments stop prematurely (prior to the child turning age 18 years), and there is no record that the child reentered state custody. These data do not provide a reason that the subsidy stops, only the end date of the last payment. However, a systematic spot-check of these cases found that the children were no longer living in the home after the subsidy payment ended (Testa, Snyder, Wu, Rolock, & Liao, 2014). Approximately one-third ( $N = 361$ ) of these children also experienced the death of at least one caregiver. The same rate of post-adoption and post-guardianship discontinuities was observed (38%). A smaller proportion of subsidies ended among children living with non-related caregivers (35%) than relative caregivers

(40%). The proportion of discontinuity by race was: 37% among Black children, 46% of Hispanic children, 43% among White children, and 47% of children of other races/ethnicities. This type of discontinuity occurred more frequently among females (40%) than males (35%). Examples include:

Hailey exited foster care through guardianship with a relative at age 7 years. She spent 2 years with her guardians, and, at age 9 years, her subsidy payment ended.

At age 1 year, Kevin was adopted by relatives where he lived for 11 years. At age 12 years, his adoption subsidy payment stopped. At least one of his caregivers died, and this event may have been the cause of the premature ending of the subsidy payments.

### STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Administrative data were used in this study and, as such, are incomplete. For example, this study relied on social security numbers to identify unique caregivers; however, the data do not distinguish when a change from one caregiver to another represents a change from one spouse to the other, or from one relative to another, and may not mean a change in placement for the child. In addition, these data do not distinguish when discontinuity is a result of a family seeking services that they cannot access outside the formal foster care system and when it is due to a familial relationship breaking down. Festinger and Maza (2009) suggest that, because the parental rights of the adoptive parents had not been terminated, this lack of termination signals a potential for reunification with the adoptive parents. While that potential might be plausible for the children who enter state custody to gain access to needed services (e.g., institutional care or specialized treatment), these data do not allow one to ascertain the intent behind the placements. Furthermore, there is no record of how the children perceive their relationship with their caregiver. These data do not, for example, report on the support system of the child, if they are supported, emotionally or financially, by their birth parents, adoptive parents or legal guardians after state custody. Other studies report that most caregivers state that they have positive feelings towards the children they have adopted or assumed guardianship (Fuller et al., 2006; Testa et al., 2014). From these data it is unclear if the children would report the same feelings, or how those feelings impact continuity in caregiving. Future research should involve interviews with caregivers and children to better understand these dynamics, and the enduring quality of these relationships.

An additional limitation of this study is that the first permanency was coded, and the children could be at risk for additional discontinuity. For example, one girl was adopted by relatives where she lived for 2.5 years. At age 10 years, she reentered state custody and spent 10 months with foster parents who eventually became her legal guardians; she lived with them for 5 years.

She then reentered state custody a second time (at age 16 years). During her second stay in foster care, she lived for 3 years in institutions and in specialized foster care. As of the latest data pull she is preparing to emancipate from care. In this study, her record shows that she has experienced discontinuity, but her complete history is not considered.

Unlike other studies that track outcomes for children for several years after adoption, an important strength that sets this study apart is that outcomes were tracked over a long period of time. In addition, this study tracked outcomes for children adopted and whose caregivers assumed legal guardianship, providing a more comprehensive look at post-permanency continuity. Finally, these data represent a large population, rather than a sample, of children who have been transitioned from foster care through adoption or guardianship.

## DISCUSSION

Little is known about the long-term outcomes of children who transition from state custody to the care and custody of adoptive parents and new legal guardians. Although services exist to address the needs of children and their families after adoption or guardianship, for some families these services are not enough, and children return to child welfare systems. A recent report estimates that between 1% and 10% of children reenter state custody after an adoption or guardianship (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). However, most of what is known about the rate at which these children return to state custody is through small samples of children, and most of these studies track outcomes for 1 or 2 years post-legal permanence. This current study uses administrative data to track children for at least 10 years post-adoption or post-guardianship, or until the age of majority. While most children (87%) appear to remain with their adoptive parents or legal guardians, a small percentage, but an ever growing number, of children experience post-permanency discontinuity. A significant contribution of this study is the ability to track children longitudinally and differentiate types of discontinuity, suggesting a different child welfare system response based on the type of discontinuity (summarized in following text).

### Paper Changes (7%)

These are children who did not reenter state custody, yet were assigned a new adoptive parent or guardian the same day that they terminated with their first adoptive parent or legal guardian. This approach may reflect contingency plans that allow a new caregiver to take over in instances of the death or incapacitation of an original caregiver, or may represent a change due to divorce, or other change in life circumstances. The response to these families might be as simple as a check-in to see how the child is doing, or a discussion with the child's parents or guardians to better understand these changes.

### Returned to Caregiver (3%)

These children reentered state custody and later reunited with their adoptive parent or legal guardian. These children appear to reenter custody to receive services they cannot access outside the formal foster care system. This may be because the services are cost-prohibitive, or because the adoptive parent or legal guardian does not know how to access needed services. For these families the response might be similar to what Festinger and Maza (2009) proposed for post-adoption placements. Perhaps the response to these situations should focus on access to services and supports outside the formal child welfare system.

### Intensive Services (21%)

Children reentered state custody and were in placements that provide intensive services, including institutions, group homes, detention and specialized foster care. A better understanding of why these children reentered custody, and how many of their parents remained connected to them while they were in state custody, is needed. If connections to adoptive parents or legal guardians are maintained, perhaps these families should, like the previous category, receive services and supports to enhance family stability outside the foster care system. In addition, research into targeted preventive services to provide stability for these families is needed.

### Traditional or Kinship Care (25%)

These children reentered state custody and were placed in traditional or kinship foster care. Most (70%) of these children had at least one caregiver who died. While the timing of the death is unknown, it is more than likely that these two events are related. Perhaps these cases could be better served if there was a contingency plan in place at the time of legal permanence (e.g., successor guardianship).

### Short-Term (6%)

These children reentered state custody for less than 1 year, and most (88%) also had a caregiver who died. Similar to the previous category, perhaps better contingency plans could help these families.

### Subsidy Ended (38%)

Little is known about the children whose subsidy ended prematurely; these children may no longer be living in the home. Additional research is needed to understand their outcomes, stability, safety and well-being.

In sum, this study provides insight into the long-term outcomes for over 20,000 children who exited foster care through adoption or guardianship in

Illinois. These children were followed for at least 10 years or until they reached age 18 years. Most of these children experienced post-permanency continuity. For those who did not, this study is a first step towards understanding their trajectories. With the growing numbers of children expected to exit foster care through adoption or guardianship over the next several years, it is important to highlight the long-term outcomes for children post-legal permanence.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A decade ago little was known about youth who emancipated from foster care. However, the focus of the Midwest Study (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001), along with federal and state initiatives, increased our understanding of the needs and trajectories of youth who age out of foster care. Today there are a growing number of children living outside the formal foster care system in adoptive and guardianship homes, yet little is known about their long-term outcomes and trajectories. While most children in this study did not experience post-permanency discontinuity (87%), for those who did, the variety in patterns of discontinuity suggests that there is no single response to helping these children and families. What is clear, however, is that waiting until discontinuity occurs is short-sighted. Perhaps best practice should account for the possibility that a small percentage of adoptions or guardianships will not endure. This practice would involve preparing families for the possibility of discontinuity prior to finalization, addressing this with them after legal permanence has been achieved, and ensuring that adoption- and guardianship-competent services and supports are available at the earliest signs of difficulty. New research identified early warning signs that can be used to identify families most at risk of post-permanency discontinuity (Testa et al., 2014). These early warning signs should be tested and verified.

Like marriages that begin with an intention to last forever, adults involved with adoptions and guardianships also begin with the intention of a forever family. Also like marriage, the commitment and intentions of adoptive parents and guardians may sometimes shift over time, and ultimately result in discontinuity. Discontinuity, such as divorce, although initially fraught with difficulty and stress, may ultimately prove to be best resolution for some families. Children re-entering foster care may receive needed services; adoptive parents may elect to re-configure their family, placing children safely with grandparents, aunts and uncles; youth may elect to leave a home for what they consider legitimate reasons. Currently if an adoptive parent wants to end an adoption they must return to court and convince a judge that it is in the child's best interest, or face maltreatment charges if they abandon the child. Is it always in the best interest of the child to make it so difficult to end an adoption? Could better contingency plans help these families in distress? By design, it is easier to vacate a guardianship than to end an adoption. With guardianship,

parental rights may not be terminated, providing a legal path for birth parents to reestablish their parental rights. Should a similar option be available for adoptions that end in discontinuity?

There is also new research on how young adults define and view legal permanence and the role they play in sustaining or ending the permanency relationship (Pérez, 2014). Pérez illuminates the complicated decisions these families face from the point of view of young adults who were involved with the child welfare system. Future work should expand upon this research to understand the challenges faced by youth who leave their adoptive or guardianship homes prior to adulthood from a variety of points of view. This research should include an examination of the developmental challenges, trauma associated with these events, and the resiliency and strength of those involved that help them manage challenging times. This information would help to illuminate the post-permanency issues and pathways towards understanding how to better prepare future generations of families for the challenges they may face after adoption or guardianship.

#### NOTE

1. This term was developed by a team focusing on post-permanency research, under the direction of Mark F. Testa, Ph.D., the Spears-Turner Distinguished Professor at the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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