Submission #310

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Project Title:
Trajectories of Economic Disconnection among Families in the Child Welfare System: Using Administrative Data to Assess Implications for Family Reunification

Which thematic area does your project most strongly link to?:

Children and the intergenerational transmission of poverty

Description of Project's Link to Core Thematic Research Area Noted Above:
This project focuses on a particularly vulnerable subgroup of poor families with children –
those who come in contact with the child welfare system. The goal of the project is to discern
patterns of family income dynamics -- and types of economic disconnection -- relative to
spells of child welfare involvement and assess the impact of these trajectories on family
reunification (versus termination of parental rights). Family reunification, as soon as safely
possible, is the preferred outcome of child welfare intervention. The longer youth remain in
care, the more likely they are to experience multiple moves and escalating risk including
behavioral problems, delinquency, and school failure. Timely reunification with the family of
origin is particularly important for adolescents, who are less likely to be adopted than younger
children. As age of placement increases, the risk of aging out of foster care without a
permanent home rises.

Total Funding Requested:
$19,693

How will you be accepting this award?:
Award to my institution (10% cap on indirects)

**IRB: Describe a timely plan for obtaining IRB approval or exemption for human
subjects research.:**
The Washington State IRB has approved the use of state administrative data for the purposes
outlined in this proposal.

**Upload a PDF containing project narrative, budget and justification, project timeline,
and CVs (for all investigators):**
hook_ucdavis_app.pdf [4]

Other information

Browser:
Firefox 7.0

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Trajectories of Economic Disconnection among Families in the Child Welfare System:

Using Administrative Data to Assess Implications for Family Reunification

This application proposes a one-year study of economically disconnected families in the child

welfare system (families neither employed nor receiving public cash assistance[1]). Drawing on a data

set linking 10 years (1999-2009) of administrative data collected by three state agencies in

Washington state -- child welfare, economic services, and employment security – we will construct

income histories of 23,000 families prior to and following entry into the child welfare system. We

will discern patterns of family income dynamics -- and types of economic disconnection -- relative to

spells of child welfare involvement and assess the impact of trajectories on family reunification.

INTRODUCTION

Attention has recently focused on the particularly vulnerable subgroup of poor families,

those who neither work nor receive public cash assistance [1-6]. National estimates suggest about

one fifth of low-educated single mothers and welfare leavers head such *economically disconnected*

households [7]. This project focuses on a particularly vulnerable subgroup of poor families – those

who come in contact with the child welfare system. Poverty is an enduring characteristic of child

welfare involved families, implicated in child protection referrals [8], out-of home placements (i.e.

placement into foster care) [9-11], and slowing the time to family reunification [12-14].

Significant policy changes to welfare (P.L. 104-193) [15] and child welfare (P.L. 105-89) [16]

in the late 1990s heighten the risk of economic disconnection and may decrease the rate of family

reunification (the primary goal of the child welfare system). Welfare time limits reduce families'

access to cash assistance, increasing the number of families who are now economically disconnected

[7]. During the same period, the Adoption and Safe Families Act limited the time children could

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[1] Public cash assistance refers to cash assistance received from a government program, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, also referred to as welfare), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and General Assistance (GA). In Washington State these programs are all administered by the same administration.

remain in out-of-home placement before agencies are required to initiate termination of parental rights. As McGowan [17] notes there was no real consideration of the potential impact of these reforms on families in need of child welfare services.

More than a decade later, our cross-sectional research shows that one-quarter of families with children in out-of-home placement are economically disconnected. They report higher levels of unmet needs and lower levels of investment in working with child welfare services than other child welfare involved families, making them a harder group of parents for the child welfare system to serve and jeopardizing their ability to safely reunify with their children [18, 19].

QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

What trajectories of economic disconnection do we observe relative to spells of child welfare involvement? Although the welfare literature has identified several disconnection patterns -- such as the chronically disconnected [2] or high intensity cyclers [20] -- we have no information about patterns relative to child welfare involvement. We hypothesize some families are economically disconnected *before* and remain disconnected *after* contact with the child welfare system (chronically disconnected). We expect, however, that some families become disconnected only *after* contact with the child welfare system and that some *previously disconnected* families become connected to benefits or employment after contact. The relative size of these, and other groups, will help establish whether child welfare involvement is pushing a group of previously connected families into disconnection and/or if involvement is helping disconnected families become connected.

What is the impact of various trajectories of economic disconnection on family reunification? Although we expect families experiencing any type of economic disconnection to be slower to reunify than families continuously connected to employment or benefits, we hypothesize that the type of disconnection matters. On the one hand, chronically disconnected families may fare the worst, in part, because the same characteristics that cause a family to be chronically disconnected

also make it more difficult for that family to navigate the demands of the child welfare system. On the other hand, chronically disconnected families may fare better than a family that loses connection upon entry to the child welfare system because the chronically disconnected family has found other ways to "make ends meet" unlike a newly disconnected family that must simultaneously navigate two unfamiliar states – disconnection and child welfare involvement. They may also be less likely to positively engage with a system that they hold responsible for their loss of economic supports.

My colleagues and I have conducted the only study we are aware of that focuses on economically disconnected families involved with child welfare [18]. To measure disconnection we used point-in-time self-reports from a statewide survey of child-welfare involved caregivers. Point-in-time classifications, however, limit our view of the dynamic nature of economic disconnection [2, 6], and its connection to child outcomes. Simultaneously observing child welfare involvement and economic disconnection cannot reveal which status occurred first nor causal connections from one status to the other. Understanding how trajectories unfold over time is particularly important for child welfare involved parents because participation in *both* systems can impose conflicting mandates on families, jeopardizing their ability to fully comply with the requirements of either system [21].

Studies of economic disconnection in other populations have examined disconnection using cross-sectional survey data of welfare leavers [1, 4, 7, 22] or by using categorizations from decision rules with longitudinal data [2, 6]. Ad hoc categorizations are useful, but risk failing to identify unexpected or rare trajectories [23, 24]. Empirically derived trajectories are also statistically verifiable, and allow for a refined classification of temporal order often missed in ad hoc classifications [23].

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data. The proposal utilizes a recently constructed file of linked administrative data from the Washington State agencies charged with administering child welfare, means-tested programs, and unemployment insurance. Table 1 summarizes data sources and contents. Administrative data

provides a large sample of a low incidence phenomenon allowing us to identify rare trajectories. It also allows access to three years of continuous, longitudinal data, which would be difficult to collect via survey for an extended period [25, 26], particularly with under-reporting of benefit receipt [27].

It builds upon a file Hook [28, 29] has analyzed that includes all children placed into out-of-home care from 2001 through 2007. The data contain exact dates of entries into and exits from care in addition to child and placement characteristics. From here, we identified the primary caregiver of each child and their partner. The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) then added data on economic services and employment from DSHS's Integrated Client Database (ICDB). The Washington State IRB has approved the use of this data for the purposes outlined in this proposal. Washington resembles the national average on many barometers of child welfare.

The ICDB uses a probabilistic matching to link clients served by DSHS and other state agencies [30]. Probabilistic is preferred over deterministic matching because it reduces the incidence of false negatives [26]. Administrative data, however, presents challenges and limitations, which we will address. False negatives will be investigated by running sensitivity analyses using matching weights [30] and with supplemental data on high-incidence economic services (e.g. SNAP) and on death and moves in the ICDB [31]. Additionally, the Unemployment Insurance (UI) records do not record all employment. A study of welfare leavers in Washington, however, found high correspondence between UI and survey data; employment rates were six points higher with survey data [32]. Thus, we expect to slightly under-estimate employment, upwardly biasing our estimates of economic disconnection, and downwardly biasing the effect of disconnection on reunification.

Measures. We will construct variables measuring child welfare involvement, monthly household benefit participation, quarterly employment, and family characteristics. To create trajectories, we will use quarterly income histories for 18 months prior and 18 months following out-of-home placement (beginning in 1999 for children placed in 2001 and ending in 2009 for children

placed in 2007). To model the impact of trajectories we will predict days from placement in out-of-home care to reunification (67.4%) compared to competing exits (e.g. adoption). We will control for fixed covariates such as a child's race and reasons for removal.

Methods. We will use group-based trajectory modeling to identify distinctive trajectories[33, 34]. Group-based trajectory has been used for similar outcomes [24, 35, 36]. Next, we use multinomial logistic regression with fixed covariates (e.g., race) to predict group membership [24, 33]. This will allow us to identify which groups are more likely to follow certain trajectories. We will then model family reunification using competing risks event history models. To distinguish causal from correlational associations, models will be replicated using an instrumental variable approach relying on exogenous variation in economic connection created by spatial and temporal variation in unemployment rates [37-39] and office-to-office variation in the administration of cash assistance [40]. A third potential instrument is the physical co-location of CSOs with child welfare offices.

RELEVANCE

The study is the first to examine trajectories of economic disconnection among child welfare involved families and to connect these trajectories to family reunification. It is also the first study of economic disconnection using group based modeling to create trajectories, instead of a priori categorizations. Although the end of the observation period begins the Great Recession, given promising results, findings will be updated with recent data.

Child-welfare involved families are a population of great concern because of the long-run impacts on children and families, and the substantial public resources devoted to child protection. This work will inform current policy deliberations within child welfare and economic services (i.e., cross-systems coordination, concurrent benefit policies). National and state stakeholders have shown substantial interest in this topic. For example, our research team recently engaged with stakeholders in a roundtable dialogue, culminating in a brief for policy and practice audiences [41].

Table 1. Data Sources and Elements

Source	Data details
Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children's Administration	Children removed from home, first time removals 2001-2007 (N=38,223 children)
DSHS Economic Services Administration	Means-tested program records for primary and secondary caregivers ("parents") of children identified in CA data (N=23,320 families with 40,685 parents). Records include monthly amounts for TANF, state general assistance, refuge assistance, and SSI cash grants; monthly SNAP benefit amounts; and records for participation in TANF child care grants and child support collections
Employment Security Department	Quarterly employment and earnings records for parents. Monthly Unemployment Insurance payments

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BUDGET JUSTIFICATION

Personnel

Jennifer Hook, Ph.D., Principal Investigator (1.0 summer month): Dr. Hook will oversee and execute all aspects of the project. Summer salary will be used to dedicate a full month to completing analyses and drafting a manuscript. Drs. Romich and Marcenko (University of Washington) will mentor and collaborate with Hook at no cost to the grant.
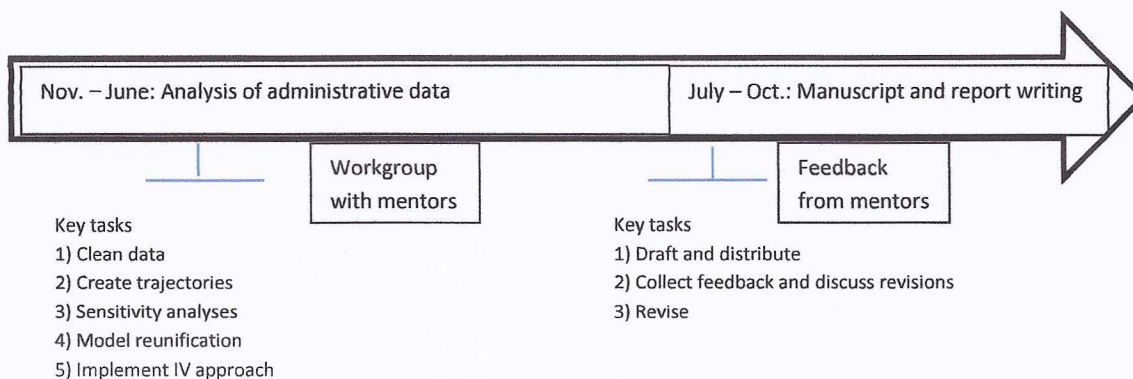
Fringe Benefits

Fringe Benefits were calculated using USC DHHS Federal Rate Agreement from June 26, 2012 that set the fringe benefit rate at 32.8% through June 30, 2014.

Travel

Funds were budgeted to support travel for Dr. Hook and her project mentors, Drs. Romich and Marcenko (University of Washington) to convene in-person for a work session at an upcoming national conference (either the Society for Social Work Research in January or the Population Association of America in April).

Indirect Costs

Indirect costs were calculated using the modified total direct costs, which is the total direct costs less any equipment budgeted and only on the first $25,000 of a subaward. The sponsor allowed rate of 10% was used.

TIMELINE

Nov. – June: Analysis of administrative data	July – Oct.: Manuscript and report writing

Workgroup with mentors

Feedback from mentors

Key tasks
1) Clean data
2) Create trajectories
3) Sensitivity analyses
4) Model reunification
5) Implement IV approach

Key tasks
1) Draft and distribute
2) Collect feedback and discuss revisions
3) Revise

In the first three-quarters of the grant period, I plan to clean and analyze the data, convening with project mentors/collaborators by phone (and once in person) at critical decision points in the analysis. During final quarter of the grant period, I plan to draft manuscripts and reports. Ultimately, I envision writing two manuscripts from this project -- one investigating trajectories and another linking trajectories to family outcomes. Potential journals for these papers include *Social Problems* and the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.