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Nondelinquent Children in State Custody: Does Type of Placement Matter?[1]

Harold Leitenberg,[2] John D. Burchard, Donald Healy, and Eloise J. Fuller
University of Vermont

School attendance and police contact data were collected over 3 years on 187 children between 6 and 17 years of age in State custody because of neglect and unmanageability. The major purpose of the study was to determine if these measures of performance varied as a function of four different types of placements typically used for these children: foster homes, group homes, a "reform" school, and natural homes (living at home with biological parents). For children between ages 11-13 and 14-16 school attendance was lower and police contact higher when living with their parents than when living in alternative placements.

Many children in the United States become wards of the State because they suffer from parental neglect or abuse or because they are considered unmanageable. Such children are sometimes referred to as "status offenders." This is a misleading term because these children are not being charged for engaging in "delinquent" or criminal acts. The number of children involved is quite large. For example, current estimates suggest that at least 350,000 children in the United States are in foster homes, just one of the alternative types of placements used for these children.

When the State obtains legal custody of such children, it is assumed that they will be better off in some alternative placement, be it a foster home, a group home, or some other residential facility such as a training school or residential treatment center. Objective tests of this assumption are

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[2]All correspondence should be sent to Harold Leitenberg, Department of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont 05405.

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rare, however, and there is currently widespread criticism of our system of dealing with these children. Headlines in the popular press, such as "warehousing children," "children in limbo," and "children adrift," are common. A California legislative committee recently concluded an investigative report as follows:

> No one can prove that truants who become wards of the court end up better educated than those who do not. No one can show that promiscuous teenagers who are institutionalized have fewer illegitimate children than those who are not. Nor can anyone show that runaways who become wards of the court end up leading better adjusted lives than those who do not. Finally, no one can prove that unruly disobedient minors who come under court supervision end up in prison less often than those who do not. (Harris, 1978)

"Not proved" is not equivalent to "not true," but the major reason no one can prove anything one way or the other is because few studies have attempted to make such an evaluation. It is not uncommon, on the other hand, to see research showing that a particular type of intervention, e.g., institutional or foster home placement, is failing to achieve optimum outcomes. For example, repeated suggestions have been made in the professional literature that foster care is obsolete and incapable of meeting the needs of typical foster children. Maas and Engler (1959), in a study of nine communities, reported a 40-60% incidence of psychological disturbance in foster children. Eisenberg (1962) found that in a clinic sample of foster children, one-half of the sample had serious school problems, one-third stole, and a modal IQ was only in the 80-89 range. These and other reports of prolonged State custody combined with multiple shifts in foster placement give good cause for skepticism about the value of such programs. The question remains, however, would these children do better or worse elsewhere? Would the short-term and/or long-term outcomes be better if they were placed in group homes, in institutions, or if they were left with or returned home to their parents? We have no answers to these questions because objective comparisons of the relative effectiveness of alternative placements have seldom been conducted.

The single noteworthy exception is an outgrowth of the Cambridge-Sommerville youth study reported by McCord, McCord, and Thurber (1960). This was a retrospective analysis of later adult behavior of 19 boys who had been placed in foster homes as compared to a "matched" control sample who had not been removed from their homes; 15 of the 19 former foster-home children exhibited adult criminal behavior whereas only 8 of the 19 controls exhibited such behavior. Although these two groups were matched post hoc on such variables as ratings of affection of biological parents for child, presence or absence of father, etc., no match was made for the behavior of the boys at the time of placement; and random assignment to foster homes versus retention in natural home was not attempted. Furthermore, there is reason to believe there were prior differences in the

behavior of these two groups since the authors state that foster placement was used as a "last resort." Notwithstanding these methodological concerns, this study at least attempted to do what no other study before or since has ever done: namely, compare the long-term effects of two alternative placements—foster home versus retention in the natural home.

Whereas McCord et al. (1960) looked at the adult behavior of two groups of men who formerly had a different placement history as children, the purpose of the present study was to compare some current indices of adjustment of same-aged children while residing in four different types of placements: foster homes, group homes, their own homes, and an institution for delinquent and unmanageable youth.

METHOD

Subject Selection

Subjects were selected over the course of two years (10/74-9/76). The study was conducted in conjunction with a series of training programs for foster parents of preadolescent and adolescent children. Upon assembling each class of new foster parents, information was gathered regarding their foster children. The local district office of the State Department of Social Rehabilitation Services (SRS) was then contacted to find the closest matches in age and sex of other children in the custody of the State who were at that time residing (a) in other foster homes, (b) in group homes, (c) in the State's only "training" school, (d) at home with their biological parents. We tried to find an equal number of matches from each of these other categories. Over this period, 187 children were selected for our study sample. At the time of selection they had to be between the ages of 6 and 17.

All of the 187 children were in the custody of the SRS. The original formal adjudication was for either neglect or unmanageability—the typical "children in need of supervision" (CHINS) category. Neglect was cited more often for children who were below age 11 at the time of commitment to State custody whereas unmanageability was cited more often if children were 11 or older.

Representativeness of Sample

The sample of 187 children was found to be representative of the larger pool of committed children of similar age who were in the active files of the local SRS office during this same period. The larger pool consisted of 311 children, making our study sample over 50% of the total. A comparison between the study sample and a randomly drawn sample of 60 children

revealed no significant differences in age, sex distribution, age when first committed to custody, total number of placements, total time in custody, or distribution of type of first placement.

Subject Characteristics and History

Table I shows the number of children in the study sample who were committed to the State's custody between the ages of 0-4, 5-7, 8-10, 11-13, and 14-16, a total of 30, 27, 30, 45, and 55 children, respectively. The sex distribution, as indicated in Table I, shows a higher proportion of males than females in this sample (106 males, 81 females). The mean age of the children at the time the study was concluded is also shown in Table I. As of December 31, 1977, 96 of the children had reached age 16 (or older) and 121 had reached age 14 (or older). Because of the way this sample of children was originally selected and the limited time period in which school attendance and police contact data were collected, the older children in our sample tended to be those who were committed to the State's custody at a later age.

The children in this study sample had a turbulent placement history. This is best illustrated by looking first at the subsample of 96 children who had attained age 16 by the time the study was concluded. These children had already reached an age which can show a relatively complete picture of placement history while in custody. Table II presents the mean number of placements and the mean time in custody for this sample as a function of the children's age at commitment. The mean number of placements for the different commitment age subgroups range from 5 to 10.

The older the child is at the time s(he) is first committed to custody the more rapidly s(he) is moved from one placement to another. This is vividly illustrated in Figure 1. Looking once again at the entire sample of 187 children, the data were recast into "move rates" by dividing the total number of placements by months in custody for each child. The move-rate statistic thus controls for different opportunities to move, i.e., different custody durations. Regardless of sex there is a significiantly higher rate of moves for children committed between ages 11 to 13 and 14 to 16 than for

Table I. Age and Sex Distribution as a Function of Age at Commitment

Age at Commitment	Mean age at 12/31/77	Males	Females
0-4	12.46	19	11
5-7	12.40	16	11
8-10	12.86	18	12
11-13	15.55	32	13
14-16	17.29	21	34

Table II. Number of Placements and Custody Duration as a Function of Age at Commitment for 96 Children Who Reached Age 16 by 12/31/77

Age at commitment	Mean number of placements	Mean time in State custody (years; months)
0-4	7.00	13; 5
5-7	10.57	10; 5
8-10	5.00	7; 3
11-13	6.81	4; 3
14-16	5.22	2; 5

children committed at the younger age ranges, $F = 17.40$, $p < .01$. At the older age range the mean move rate is substantially over one per year. It is also interesting to observe that females committed between ages 14 to 16 move more than two times per year, a statistically significant difference in comparison to males of the same age range, $F = 3.98$, $p < .05$. There were no statistically significant sex differences at the younger age of commitment subgroups.

The higher move rate observed for children committed to custody at older ages is not solely a function of the greater difficulty the older children present to those entrusted with their care. Our data suggest that although the actual age of the child does influence move rate, so does original age at commitment. This finding is revealed in Figure 2 where move rates for

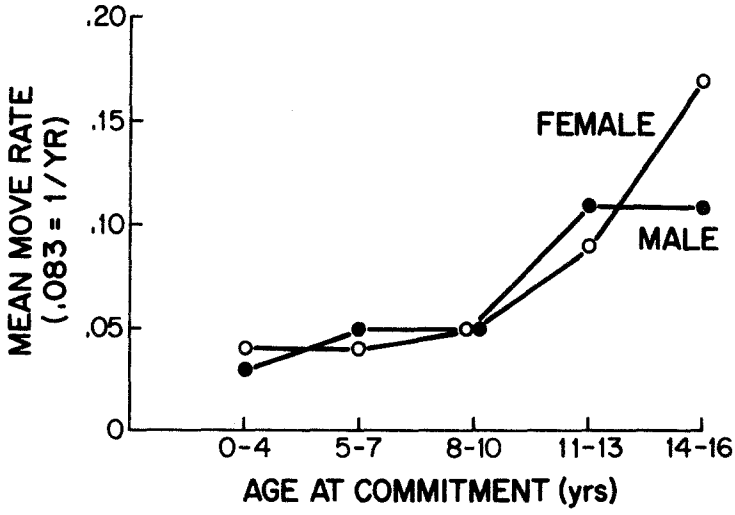

Fig. 1. Mean move rate as a function of sex and age at commitment.

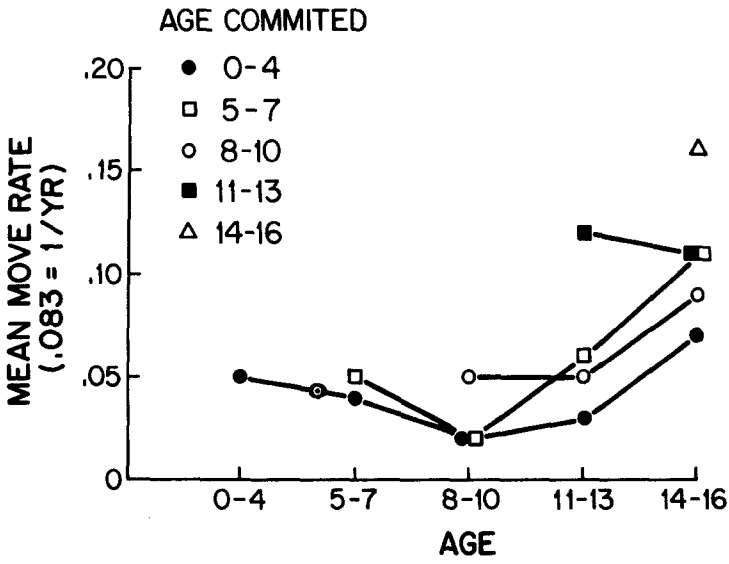

Fig. 2. Mean move rate as a function of age and age at commitment.

children at different ages are plotted as a function of their original age at commitment. Although there is typically a higher move rate when children are older, this trend is attenuated by the children's ages at commitment. For example, a Neuman-Keuls analysis indicated that children who were committed between age 0-4 do not have as high a move rate when they are 14-16 as those children who were first committed at age 14-16 ($p < .01$). These data suggest a linear progression: the older the child at the time of commitment the greater the move rate when the child reaches 14 to 16. (The 5-7 commitment age-group anomaly is largely attributable to one youth in this group who had 10 placements when he was 14-16.)

Types of placements experienced by children in our sample can be best sorted into four categories: foster homes, group homes, Weeks School, and natural homes. Foster homes and group homes are self-explanatory. Weeks School refers to Vermont's only large institution for delinquent and unmanageable youth. Natural homes are the homes of the children's biological parents. In the data contained in the present paper, a child had to be in one of these facilities for at least 15 days for the facility to be classified as a formal placement. Most of the children in this sample experienced multiple *types* of placements (as well as multiple numbers of the same type) while under the custody of the State. Seventy percent had been in foster homes (and for this 70% the mean number of foster home placements per child was 2.41). Sixty-five percent had been placed at some time in their natural home. This could occur immediately after adjudication, after some

other type of placement, or between other types of placements. For example, it was common to encounter a child with a sequence of moves such as foster home, natural home, foster home, natural home. The second foster home placement could have been the same as the first or a different home. In either case, this sequence would be considered four placements. For those children who had ever been placed in their natural home, the mean number of natural home placements per child was 1.93. Thirty-seven percent of the sample had been in one or more group homes and the mean number per child was 1.30. And finally, 35% had been in Weeks School at least once, with the mean number per child being 1.60. Thus, it can be seen that the same type of placement, particularly foster homes and natural homes, was usually tried more than once for a given child.

Type of placement was found to be somewhat affected by the current age of the child and age at the time of original commitment, as well as by a host of other factors, e.g., available space, caseworkers' judgments, etc. Generally, however, both group homes and Weeks School were reserved for children over 12. Nevertheless, if one examines the children's very first placement as a function of age of commitment a surprisingly large percentage of older children were still being given a trial at foster homes. For example, the distribution of type of first placement for children who were committed at age 11-13 was 28.9% foster home, 26.7% natural home, 15.6% group home, 17.8% Weeks School, and 11.1% "other." In the group committed at age 14-16 the percentages of first placements were 25.5% for foster homes, 14.5% for natural homes, 5.5% for group homes, 43.6% for Weeks School, and 10.9% for "other." As might be expected, foster homes were most often the type of placement used first for younger children. For chose children originally committed at age 0-4, 86.7% were first placed in a foster home. For those first committed at age 5-7, 59.3% were first placed in a foster home.

Regardless of type of placement, the median length of stay was not long. Across all age groups and irrespective of the number of placements, the data compiled for this sample of youth yielded the following median durations per type of placement: foster home = 6.93 months, natural homes = 5.33 months, group homes = 6.07 months and Weeks School = 3.95 months.

Outcome Measures and Procedures

The major purpose of this study was to compare the performance of children when they were in different types of placements. Two objective measures were employed for this purpose: school attendance and police contacts. These data were collected for a 3-year period (1974-77) for each of

the 187 children in the study sample. In order to compare whether school attendance differed when children of comparable ages were in foster homes, group homes, natural homes, or Weeks School, a minimum of three consecutive school months had to be spent in a placement in order to be included in this part of the study. In other words, if a child had been in a group home for 6 months, a foster home for 2 months, and his/her natural home for 4 months, school attendance would only be analyzed for the group home and natural home placements.

There were certain other practical constraints on what data could be collected and included. In regard to school attendance the child had to be officially enrolled in a public school which kept attendance records on at least a monthly basis. This turned out to be a special problem for group homes. In 31% of the cases, when children in our sample resided in group homes, they were never enrolled in the public school system. Thus, even though these children may have been in residence in a group home for longer than three consecutive school months, there were no records of school attendance available. This, however, was not an issue for Weeks School children. Although this institution has a school on its own grounds, it is an accredited public school, run in a classroom format typical of other public schools in the State.

A different problem arose in regard to police contact data. Police contact refers to a written record of a response by the police to some complaint or incident, such as breaking and entering, vandalism, theft, public disturbance, fights, running away, etc. In the district in which these data were collected, a child already in custody is seldom brought to the attention of the court for most types of offenses. Therefore, it was felt that police records rather than court records of charges and convictions would more accurately reflect actual offenses committed by these children. Unfortunately, not all police departments kept such records. The smaller the town the less likely that records were available. Thus, even though a child may have met the time criterion of at least three consecutive months in a specific placement, police contact data for that child could not be collected if the placement happened to be geographically located in an area where the police department kept no written records of contacts. Weeks School had to be completely omitted from this analysis in large measure because the police department in the town in which the school was located failed to keep such records.

All school and police data were collected during 1974-77. Since two-thirds of the children in our study sample had already reached age 14 by the end of 1977, it should be noted that we have data only for a segmented period of children's lives, primarily the early teens. For example, if a given child in the study sample was age 16 in 1977, we would have data only for that child going back to when he or she was 14. And if a child was 16 in 1974 and then dropped out of school, we would have school data only for that

child for that year. Because of practical limitations we were not able to go back into school records before 1974 to get a complete longitudinal picture of each child's entire school history while in the State's custody.

Although we were also unable to obtain school records prior to the child's commitment to custody, this is probably not as significant an omission as first might be thought. As seen earlier, the children in our sample had for the most part been in the State's custody for many years. Thus, it would not in any case be meaningful to compare school attendance when a child is 7 years of age (precustody) with school attendance of the same child when s(he) is 14 and is for the first time placed in a group home. The age difference rather than the placement difference would probably have a greater impact on school attendance.

Given these limitations in data collection we were still able to compare school and police records for a substantial number of children of comparable ages who were in different types of placements for varying lengths of time. These children were, of course, not randomly assigned to these placements. While this would have been ideal from a methodological standpoint, the State was not willing to do this for a variety of understandable political, practical, and ethical reasons. Therefore, we simple tracked how well the children did when they happened to be in one type of placement rather than another. Since over 80% experienced multiple placements, a given child often contributed data to several different types of placements over the 3-year period in which these data were compiled. It should also be noted that because these children were moved so frequently, records in over 20 different schools had to be searched. Also 16 different group homes were involved in the study.

RESULTS

School attendance and police contact data are presented in Figures 3 and 4, respectively. Since both of these measures are likely to be influenced by the age of the child, these data are plotted as a function of both type of placement and three different age levels: 8-10, 11-13, and 14-16. Table III

Table III. Number of Subjects in Subgroups for School Attendance and Police Contact Data

	Age level					
	8-10		11-13		14-16	
Placement	School	Police	School	Police	School	Police
Foster homes	26	13	33	12	33	24
Natural homes	11	14	13	19	24	39
Group homes	1	0	13	8	12	13
Weeks school	0	0	3	0	33	0

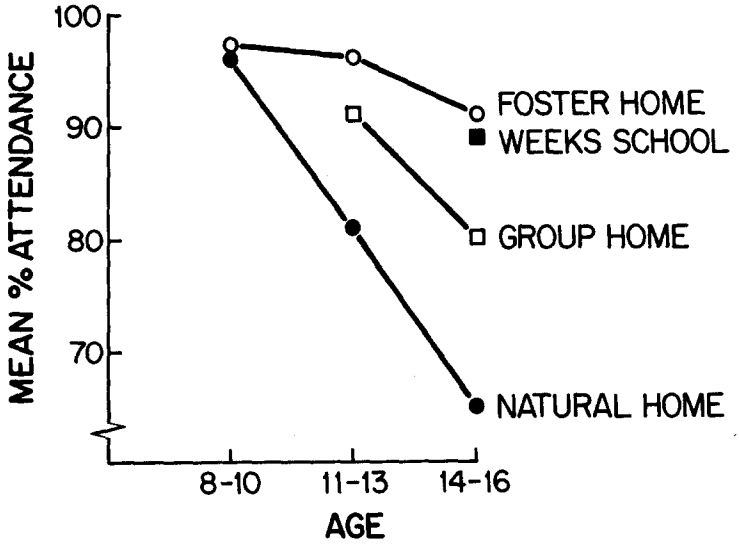

Fig. 3. School attendance as a function of age and type of placement.

indicates the number of subjects in each subgroup who met the various criteria for inclusion described in the previous section. If the number of subjects per cell was under eight, their data are not included in the figure.

Figure 3 reveals some striking differences in school attendance as a function of the type of placement and the current age of the child. It is not particularly surprising to find a decrease in school attendance with increasing age. The results of greater interest are the differences observed in school attendance between the different placements at age 11-13 and 14-16, respectively. In the 11-13 age group it can be seen that school attendance for children residing with their natural parents was substantially lower than for children residing in group homes (and enrolled in school) and foster homes. An analysis of variance yielded an overall F of 5.56 ($p < .01$). Subsequent Neuman-Keuls analyses demonstrated that the differences between natural home and foster home and between natural home and group home were both statistically significant ($p < .01$). The difference between group home and foster home was not significant.

Similar results were obtained for children aged 14-16. School attendance was substantially lower when children were living at home with their parents than when they were living in foster homes, group homes, or Weeks School. The best school attendance was observed for children when they were in foster homes and in Weeks School. Group homes (excluding the 31% not enrolled) fell midway between the above two types of placements and natural homes. Although the school data from Weeks School

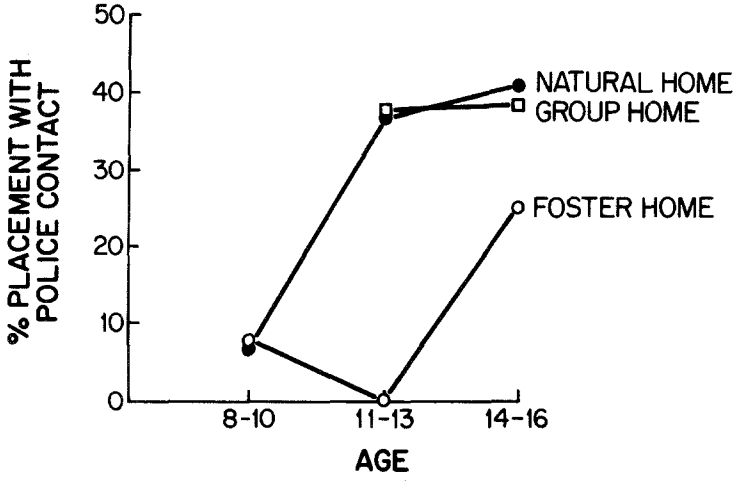

Fig. 4. Police contact as a function of age and type of placement.

may not be comparable to the other placements because of the greater degree of control and coercion possible in that setting, this is not the case for natural homes, foster homes, and group homes. Since all of these children are minors, there is no differential legal pressure exerted on any of these settings to impel children to attend school. These school attendance differences between the natural home and each of the other types of placements were statistically significant. (Analysis of variance yielded an F of 9.03, $p < .01$, and subsequent simple effects analyses yielded: $p < .01$ for natural home vs. foster home and natural home vs. Weeks School, and $p < .05$ for natural home vs. group home.) The differences between the group home, Weeks School, and foster home placements did not reach statistically significant levels.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of children in each type of placement (excluding Weeks School) who had police contact during the three different age periods. A clear difference between placements emerged in the 11-13 age group. Not a single child in the foster home category had any record of police contact, whereas nearly 40% of the children who were in group homes and in their natural homes had such contact. According to a chi-square analysis, these differences between the three types of placements were statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 6.06$, $p < .05$. In the 14-16 age group the percentage of foster children who had some police contact increased considerably. Although these foster children did not reach the same level as children residing in group homes and natural homes, the difference between groups was no longer statistically significant, $\chi^2 = .72$, $p > .05$.

DISCUSSION

Given that Vermont has a much smaller population and is much less urban than most other states, it was striking to observe how similar the placement history of our study sample was to those previously reported for Detroit (Ambinder, 1965) and Maryland (Maas & Engler, 1959). Less than 20% of the children in our sample were returned permanently to their parents prior to age 16. Supposedly temporary custody for the most part turned into permanent custody. However, although these children's tenure in the State's custody was long, the time spent in any one specific placement was short. Our data revealed that children were relatively quickly shifted from one placement to another. And such shifts were more rapid the older the child was at the time s(he) was first committed to the State's custody. Although these data were obtained from only one district in the State and therefore might not be representative of the State as a whole, there is little reason to predict this would be the case. Instead the more likely conclusion is that children committed to the custody of the State of Vermont because of neglect or unmanageability are not immune to some of the same problems experienced in larger, more urban environments in other States. For a host of reasons, nondelinquent children in State custody are being moved about a great deal.

In a paradoxical way, the ambivalence about removing children from their homes in the first place may be a contributing factor to the multiple placements experienced by these children. On the one hand, society wants to "save children" and arrange better environments for them. On the other hand, we believe in the sanctity of the home and rightfully feel that a child should only be removed as a last resort. But eventually a large number of neglected and unmanageable children are in fact removed. However, once these children are taken from parents there is considerable guilt and pressure to return them home as soon as possible because no one really believes they are better off elsewhere. In fact, many professionals believe they may be worse off (e.g., De Fries, Jenkins, & Williams, 1965; Eisenberg, 1962; Mnookin, 1973).

Our results suggest that not all types of placements are equally effective. And most especially it was found that children between the ages of 11 and 13, and 14 and 16 had significantly poorer school attendance and children between 11 and 13 had significantly more frequent negative police contacts when they were placed in their natural homes than when they were elsewhere. And on both measures children tended to perform most acceptably when they were in foster homes.

Since the children in our sample could not be randomly assigned to different types of placements, one alternative interpretation of these findings is that children with different levels of difficulty were being sys-

tematically placed in different types of settings. Although there may indeed be an attempt to do this, our experience indicates that actual day-to-day decisions regarding placement are unfortunately more haphazard than anyone wants them to be. In addition, it is hard to believe that caseworkers would consider children who are exhibiting the worst behavior problems in school and in the community the most suitable candidates for placement at home. In Vermont, at least, this would be contrary to customary practice. If a child is doing very poorly in a foster home or a group home, caseworkers will usually move the child but not to his or her natural home. Instead the natural home is usually considered only after the child has been shown to be doing well in an alternative setting.

Obviously it could also be argued that school attendance and police contact fail to tell the whole story of current behavior and emotional well-being. Even if children did poorly on these two measures, they still might be better off in other ways, both at the present time and in the long run, if they lived with their parents. For the time being, however, two objective measures of considerable social and individual relevance indicate that children attended school less and were in contact with police more at home than elsewhere. Until subsequent data can be compiled to the contrary, we suggest that serious consideration be given to these findings before placing children aged 11-16 in their natural homes. While there may be persuasive reasons for doing so in any individual case, our data suggest that with respect to school attendance and police contact, the natural home is not likely to be the placement of choice.

The long custody durations and frequent moves experienced by non-deliquent children in State custody has sparked considerable social policy debate and repeated calls for a more permanent and stable system of care. Unfortunately, the answer does not seem to lie in simply closing down foster homes and group homes and returning children to their natural parents. Perhaps some project in the future might show that the results obtained in the present study could be reversed if a much better support system for natural parents was put in place. Although this possibility is something everybody would probably hope for, the large differences obtained in the present study provide grounds for skepticism. Another often proposed solution may be more viable, namely, to remove current financial and judicial barriers to adoption.

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