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Eligibility for and participation in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study

Fred Wulczyn, Xiaomeng Zhou, Lijun Chen
Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago

This study looks at the sample children who are part of the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS). The study is designed to deepen what the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) knows about the wellbeing of children in out-of-home care (OOHC) and the factors that influence their outcomes. The study design calls for children placed on final care and protection orders (hereafter final orders) to be followed over roughly five years and three waves of data collection. Data collection links administrative data with data collected from carers, childcare workers or teachers, caseworkers and the children themselves.

The broad contours of the study sample are as follows. To be considered eligible for the study, a child or young person would have had to enter OOHC for the first time between May 2010 and October 2011. This group of children is known as the population cohort. Of children in that group ($n=4,126$), children who were placed on a final order were then considered study eligible ($n=2,828$)¹. From the final orders/

¹ In the analysis of the administrative data which follows, the count of cases is 2,826 rather than 2,828. This is because one child in the population cohort, who was study eligible and interviewed, had been overlooked and was not included in the administrative data. In addition, the number of not eligible children in the following analysis (1,242) includes one child who was incorrectly classified.

study eligible cohort, FACS recruited caregivers to participate in an interview (n=1,789). Of that group, 1,285 completed the Wave 1 interview².

In this overview, we examine two key points in the process of selection into the study: selection from the population cohort into the final orders/study eligible cohort and from the final orders/study eligible cohort into the group of children for whom an interview with carers was completed. With respect to the former, selection into the final orders/study eligible cohort speaks to differential experiences in OOHC. In NSW, a significant portion of children entering OOHC leave after a relatively brief placement. Because study eligibility is conditional on whether the child was placed on a final order, the POCLS focuses on children who have been and likely will be in OOHC for some time. Selection from the final orders/study eligible cohort into the group of children whose carers were interviewed speaks to a slightly different issue. In surveys of this type, for reasons having to do with caregiver willingness to participate, trouble coordinating interview schedules, and myriad other reasons, one cannot expect a 100% response rate. Therefore, it is important to understand who completed interviews in the likely event that interviews involved a non-random subset of the final orders/study eligible cohort, which could influence how the study findings generalise to the larger population of study eligible children.

3.1 Study eligibility

As described in Chapter 2, children who entered OOHC for the first time between May 2010 and October 2011 were candidates for study eligibility (i.e., an interview) once they received final orders transferring parental responsibility to the Minister by the Children's Court. As a general matter, final orders are correlated with length of stay because final orders are issued after a judgment about restoration has been made. Children with final orders may yet be returned to their parents, but the likelihood of restoration goes down with the issuance of the final order. The POCLS focuses on children with final orders to better understand what happens developmentally to children for whom FACS has taken on long-term responsibility.

Table 3.1 presents select characteristics of the children admitted to OOHC for the first time between May 2010 and October 2011 by final order/study eligibility status. Caregivers of study eligible children were later invited to an interview. Overall, 69% of the children admitted during the study window became eligible (e.g., received final orders).

As expected, final orders/study eligibility and length of time in OOHC are inversely related. Among children in care for less than one month, only 21% received a permanent care and protection order. In contrast, 88% of the children in care for 24 months or more received final orders.

² We could have but did not, for this round of the analysis, consider whether and how the population of study eligible children differed from those children whose caregivers agreed to be recruited. Children restored at the time of the Wave 1 interview were not invited to participate in the Wave 1 interview for practical and ethical reasons, but joined the study at Wave 2. Finally, the number of children reported in this study differs slightly from numbers reported elsewhere because the data set used for this study relies on linked placement and child protective services records. Children with only respite placement records (n=57) were dropped from the analysis.

Males were slightly more likely to receive final orders after admission than females. Final orders were much higher among young children – 88% of all infants were eligible for the study, whereas only 29% of the children aged 13 to 17 years became eligible.

Aboriginal children were about as likely to receive final orders and thus be eligible for the study as were non-Aboriginal children.

Most children placed in NSW are placed in family settings including both foster and relative/kinship care. Eligibility tended to be lower among children placed in non-family settings (e.g., residential care). Among children placed in relative/kinship care, final orders were less common among children placed in Aboriginal relative/kinship care (61%).

Table 3.1: The POCLS sample by study eligibility status and selected child characteristics

Characteristic	Not eligible n	Eligible n	Total n	Not eligible %	Eligible %	Total %
Time in care						
Less than 1 month	525	143	668	79	21	100
1–2 months	79	50	129	61	39	100
2–3 months	65	29	94	69	31	100
4–6 months	95	119	214	44	56	100
7–12 months	134	498	632	21	79	100
13–24 months	283	1,539	1,822	16	84	100
Over 24 months	61	448	509	12	88	100
Gender						
Female	668	1,375	2,043	33	67	100
Male	574	1,451	2,025	28	72	100
Age at placement						
Infants	116	883	999	12	88	100
1–5 years	390	1,147	1,537	25	75	100
6–12 years	339	634	973	35	65	100
13–17 years	397	162	559	71	29	100
Aboriginal status						
Non-Aboriginal	861	1,900	2,761	31	69	100
Aboriginal	381	926	1,307	29	71	100
Placement setting						
Foster care	499	1,481	1,980	25	75	100
Relative/Kinship: Non-Aboriginal	382	996	1,378	28	72	100
Relative/Kinship: Aboriginal	169	265	434	39	61	100
Residential care	37	45	82	45	55	100
Other	155	39	194	80	20	100
Total	1,242	2,826	4,068	31	69	100

Note: In this table and others that follow in this chapter, we use a different age categorisation and slightly different categorisation of Aboriginal status. With respect to age, we were interested specifically in identifying how the participation of older children compared with infants, as infants are the largest group of children entering OOH. With regard to Aboriginal status, these data are based on the administrative data maintained by FACS. Other sections of the Wave I report used data collected during the interviews to identify Aboriginal status more precisely.

3.2 Completed interviews

In this section, we examine interview status relative to final orders/study eligibility. Caregivers of children on final orders were recruited to participate in the POCLS, with some agreeing to be interviewed and others refusing to participate. The interviewed cohort consists of those children whose caregivers participated in the Wave 1 interview. Overall, as a proportion of the final orders/study eligible cohort, interviews were completed with about 45% of the children with a final order.

As with final orders/study eligibility, interview status (interviewed/not interviewed) varied with characteristics of the children (Table 3.2). Notably, interviews were strongly correlated with length of stay (restoration cases were excluded from an interview at Wave 1³). Caregivers with children who had been in OOHC for more than one year were much more likely to complete the interview (above 50%). Among children in OOHC for less than one year, completion rates were below 30%.

Gender was not a determining factor in whether an interview was completed. Age, however, was strongly associated with completion. More than half of the children who entered OOHC as infants had a completed interview, while among 13 to 17 year olds, only 27% completed the interview.

Table 3.2: The POCLS sample by interview status and selected child characteristics

Characteristic	Not interviewed n	Interviewed n	Total n	Not interviewed n	Interviewed %	Total %
Time in care						
Less than 1 month	105	38	143	73	27	100
1–2 months	46	4	50	92	8	100
2–3 months	27	2	29	93	7	100
4–6 months	108	11	119	91	9	100
7–12 months	363	135	498	73	27	100
13–24 months	708	831	1,539	46	54	100
Over 24 months	185	263	448	41	59	100
Gender						
Female	728	647	1,375	53	47	100
Male	814	637	1,451	56	44	100
Age at placement						
Infants	409	474	883	46	54	100
1–5 years	626	521	1,147	55	45	100
6–12 years	389	245	634	61	39	100
13–17 years	118	44	162	73	27	100

³ Children who had been restored prior to the start of Wave I interviews will be invited to participate in subsequent waves.

Characteristic	Not interviewed n	Interviewed n	Total n	Not interviewed n	Interviewed %	Total %
Aboriginal status						
Non-Aboriginal	1,066	834	1,900	56	44	100
Aboriginal	476	450	926	51	49	100
Placement setting						
Foster care	785	696	1,481	53	47	100
Relative/Kinship: Non-Aboriginal	538	458	996	54	46	100
Relative/Kinship: Aboriginal	160	105	265	60	40	100
Residential care	29	16	45	64	36	100
Other	30	9	39	77	23	100
Total	1,542	1,284	2,826	55	45	100

Aboriginal status did not influence interview rates, but placement type was important. Foster carers and non-Aboriginal relative/kinship carers were among the most likely to complete an interview. Children in other settings were less likely to complete the interview.

Multivariate models

Tables 3.3 and 3.4 show the results of preliminary multilevel models for eligibility/final orders and interview completion. Although consistent with what has already been reported, the models clarify important relationships.

Table 3.4 shows that with respect to eligibility/final orders, gender was not important, as already noted. Age, however, was an important factor, even after accounting for other child characteristics. Relative to children of other ages, infants were much more likely to receive final orders. Aboriginal status did not influence the likelihood that a child would receive final orders. However, children placed in Aboriginal relative/kinship care were less likely to become study eligible when compared to children in foster care.

Table 3.3: Coefficients of multilevel logit models of children's study eligibility

Variable name	Category	Log odds	Standard error	Probability value	Odds ratio
Intercept		3.6899	0.2097	<.0001	
Gender	Female	-0.1022	0.0790	0.1956	0.903
	Male	0			1.000
Age	1–5 years	-1.3717	0.1304	<.0001	0.254
	6–12 years	-2.0255	0.1355	<.0001	0.132
	13–17 years	-3.2782	0.1643	<.0001	0.038
	Infants	0			1.000
Aboriginal status	Non-Aboriginal	0.0151	0.1018	0.8818	1.015
	Aboriginal	0			1.000
Placement type	Residential care	0.1384	0.2676	0.6049	1.148
	Relative/ Kinship: Non-Aboriginal	-0.0454	0.0906	0.6161	0.956
	Relative/ Kinship: Aboriginal	-0.6066	0.1438	<.0001	0.545
	Other	-1.5052	0.2263	<.0001	0.222
	Foster care	0			1.000

Notes: The model also controls for child protection history. The results (not shown here) indicated that children with more contact with the child protection system were more likely to receive final orders.

Multilevel results for interview status are reported in Table 3.4. These data show that although the differences are not, strictly speaking, statistically significant, interviews with caregivers of female children were somewhat more likely. Age was a significant factor. Caregivers of older children, especially teenagers, were less likely to be interviewed when compared to those of infants.

Caregivers of non-Aboriginal children, when compared with caregivers of Aboriginal children, were somewhat less likely to be interviewed. Children placed in Aboriginal relative/kinship care were less likely to be interviewed when compared with children in foster care.

Table 3.4: Coefficients of multilevel logit models of eligible children who are interviewed vs. not interviewed

Variable name	Category	Log Odds estimate	Standard error	Probability value	Odds ratio
Intercept		0.4966	0.1851	0.0083	
Gender	Female	0.1244	0.0782	0.1118	1.132
	Male	0			1.000
Age	1–5 years	-0.5014	0.1083	<.0001	0.606
	6–12 years	-0.8778	0.1249	<.0001	0.416
	13–17 years	-1.3192	0.2183	<.0001	0.267
	Infants	0			1.000
Aboriginal status	Non-Aboriginal	-0.1564	0.0948	0.0992	0.855
	Aboriginal	0			1.000
Placement type	Residential care	0.2463	0.3497	0.4813	1.279
	Relative/ Kinship: Non-Aboriginal	0.0613	0.0865	0.4787	1.063
	Relative/ Kinship: Aboriginal	-0.4244	0.1548	0.0062	0.654
	Other	-0.8035	0.4053	0.0475	0.448
	Foster care	0			1.000

Notes: The model also controls for child protection history. The results (not shown here) indicated that children with more contact with the child protection system were more likely to participate in the interview.

3.3 Child protection history

The characteristics and backgrounds of the children involved in the POCLS will be further analysed and presented in a separate report. The children's demographic backgrounds, as well as their child protection history and early experiences in OOHC, will be examined to inform our understanding of how these children came into contact with the child protection system, their experiences prior to and in OOHC and how these and other factors come together to shape their growth and placement trajectories over time. More detailed analysis of these data and data from subsequent waves will help achieve this understanding.

3.4 Conclusion

The POCLS focuses on the developmental wellbeing of children placed on final orders. As a subset of all children who enter OOHC, it is important to understand who, among all the children who enter OOHC, reaches the point of having a final order before study findings are generalised to subsequent cohorts of children. The issue of generalisation is also sensitive to whether the subset of children interviewed differs from the overall final orders/study eligible cohort. Although the findings presented in this chapter are tentative, we can as a result expect to find that children in these circumstances will have developmental outcomes at Wave 1 that are generally lower than what one might find in the population of OOHC children who leave placement quickly. This is likely the case with older children who were living at home for longer periods prior to coming into OOHC. While the findings are preliminary, the results point to how one might improve the OOHC available to children across the range of placement experiences but especially for children on long-term care and protection orders.