
**A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CASE RECORDS:
TWO-GENERATIONS OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES
INVOLVEMENT**

Children's
Data Network

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Children's Data Network (CDN) is a university, agency, and community collaborative focused on the integration and application of data to inform programs and policies for children and their families. The CDN receives essential infrastructure funding from First 5 LA, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and the Heising-Simons Foundation, additional project support from the California Department of Social Services, the Reissa Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and operates in partnership with the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at UC Berkeley.



BACKGROUND

Children born to mothers in foster care have increased rates of reporting for alleged abuse or neglect in comparison to children born to mothers not in care.¹⁻⁴ Little is known about the CPS involvement of children born to mothers in care but research highlights the heterogeneity of the population of parents in care.^{5,8,9} **In order to better characterize this population, the Children's Data Network used linked administrative records to identify, and then group, children born to mothers in foster care (CDN research brief, manuscript in the Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect).** Three qualitatively distinct classes were identified through Latent Class Analysis (LCA) and the rates of two-generation CPS involvement, were notably different across classes. Class 1, titled “Non-minor mothers with stable placements” consists of mothers age 18 years and older and about half had been in care for more than a year with fewer than three placements. Class 2 was termed “Minor mothers with short placements.” This class was made up of very young mothers and nearly 40% had been in placement for less than a year. Class 3, “Mothers with unstable placements and mental health conditions”, was unique because nearly all the mothers had mental health conditions and all had been in care for more than a year with 71% experiencing more than three placements. Children in Class 1 had the lowest risk of a CPS report; 36% were reported by age three. Meanwhile, more than half (55%) of children in Class 2 and 68% of children in Class 3 were reported by age three. These results identified different risk profiles that underscore differences in service needs for groups of mothers in care and their children.

Knowledge about young parents in foster care and two-generation CPS involvement has been gleaned almost exclusively from structured fields in child welfare case records^{3,10} or through interviews and observation with families or service providers care.^{11,8} To date, case narratives that typically accompany structured fields in child welfare case records are rarely used in research. Case narratives may contain useful information about the context within which maltreatment reports are made. Case narratives document children and family contact with CPS, typically due to allegations of abuse or neglect.

PURPOSE

A content analysis of case records was conducted to assess reasons for CPS involvement among children who were born to mothers in foster care and reported to CPS in the first three years of life. The goal of this research was to inform policies and programs for mothers in foster care and for their children, who are at high risk of being reported to CPS and/or experiencing maltreatment early in life.



DATA & ANALYSES

SAMPLE

This examination builds upon an earlier study that used linked birth and child welfare records to identify all first-time pregnant and parenting mothers in foster care and their children among all births in California between 2009 and 2012 (n=2,904).⁴ Mothers who were in foster care on or after the estimated date of conception and their children were included. For more details about the LCA and classes, please see the initial study by the Children's Data Network.⁴ The current population was restricted to a sample of mother-child units in which there was a documented report of alleged maltreatment for the children between birth and age three. Thirteen mother-child units were sampled from the three classes that emerged from the LCA for a detailed examination of mother and child case records (n=39).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Case-level data were accessed from California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), the state's child welfare information database. Case narrative data are entered or collected by county child welfare staff. Records are oriented around a focal child, with supporting information for parents, perpetrators, and other individuals. Data were available through a long-standing university-agency data-sharing agreement with the California Department of Social Services. Data access falls within existing state data-use agreements and both state and university institutional review board protocols. Non-identifying information was extracted for each referral for analysis.

Content analysis is a research method that organizes qualitative data into specific and broad concepts to enhance understanding of a phenomenon.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Content analysis was selected for the analysis because it can be used to analyze large volumes of qualitative data.¹⁶ Each case was reviewed and data were coded using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 11.

FINDINGS

The content analysis showed distinct themes for each class. Additionally, although there were significant differences across classes, a few themes were common to all three. The following table summarizes similarities among the classes and unique findings for each. Quotes from caseworkers, medical personnel, educators, public safety officials, and lawyers found in the case narrative notes were used to illustrate key concepts in the published [study](#) but have been excluded from this lay brief for brevity.



EMERGING THEMES

Category	Themes
Common Across all Classes	<p>Substance abuse: Substance abuse was common and negatively affected the ability to parent; however, the extent and type of substance used and effect on parenting varied across classes.</p> <p>Homelessness: Homelessness was common among nonminor mothers but was not typically the primary concern that led to the maltreatment report.</p> <p>Multiple children: Mothers had multiple children, especially in classes 1 and 3.</p> <p>Sexual abuse: Nearly all of the mothers' case notes included a mention of one sexual abuse allegation but many contained descriptions of ongoing and extensive sexual abuse.</p> <p>Runaways: Mothers' case notes commonly mentioned that the mother had run away from foster care placements. These runaway experiences occurred before, during, and after the pregnancy.</p> <p>Services: Nearly all mothers received some services while pregnant and parenting. Services offered varied and appeared insufficient given needs.</p>
Class 1: Nonminor Mothers with Stable Placements	<p>Child maltreatment reports and investigations: Reports to CPS were typically due to parenting skills and child supervision. There was evidence of surveillance bias.</p> <p>Strong social support: Many mothers had an identifiable "co-parent," who supported the mother with child care and enabled her to attend school or obtain employment.</p> <p>Father involvement: These mothers were the most likely to cohabit with the fathers of their children and intimate partner violence was common.</p> <p>Signs of resilience: Information in the case records signaled that parents and children were doing well.</p> <p>Fear of CPS involvement: Perhaps because of their experiences in care and their desire to be good parents, mothers in Class 1 were fearful of two-generation CPS involvement.</p>



<p>Class 2: Minor Mothers with Short Placements</p>	<p>Mother's recent maltreatment: These mothers were placed in out of home care around the time of conception or the birth of their child because of recent maltreatment. Some mothers were in care due to the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy.</p> <p>Mother's trauma and developmental concerns: Trauma, young age, and developmental delays negatively affected the ability to parent for mothers in Class 2.</p> <p>Offspring maltreatment reports: Children were also commonly reported to CPS due to the mothers' lack of knowledge of child care responsibilities.</p> <p>Need for parenting support: Mothers were dependent upon assistance from others. These mothers wanted to raise their children and acknowledged they needed help to do so.</p> <p>Relationship with fathers: Fathers were absent or unknown and tended to be much older than the mothers.</p>
<p>Class 3: Mothers with Unstable Placements and Mental Health Conditions</p>	<p>Child maltreatment reports and investigations: Serious concerns led to CPS involvement. These reports were commonly related to the mother's use of drugs and/or alcohol and mental health conditions.</p> <p>Comorbid needs: Serious issues impaired parenting related to the mother's mental health issues, drug use, and criminal justice involvement.</p> <p>Lack of social support: Fathers were not engaged with the mothers or offspring. Mothers were not connected with adults in placements.</p> <p>Mothers' experience in care: Mothers had negative and sometimes abusive experiences in placements that led to discontinued CPS service and early exits from care.</p>

DISCUSSION

The findings from the present investigation described CPS involvement, stark contrasts among classes of mother-child units, highlighted barriers to service provision, and supported the utility of analyzing child welfare case narrative records.

FIRST CPS INVOLVEMENT FOR CHILDREN

In Class 1 — the class with the lowest risk of a child CPS report in the first three years of life — the child's CPS reports indicated the child was not in imminent danger. Class 1 mothers maintained contact with the fathers of the children who provided social support but whose involvement sometimes led to conflict and intimate partner violence, another reason children were reported. Extended family support and specifically the presence of a "co-parent," emerged as a strong signal of family resilience. Typically, this support was from the adult that the mother lived with during her



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long-term placement or the father of the children. These findings mirror prior research that identified the importance of social support among mothers in care.^{5,21,22}

CPS records showed that children of Class 2 mothers were reported based on parenting difficulties related to the mothers' recent trauma, maturity, and development issues. Most mothers had recent entries into care. Without a supportive adult co-parent, the mothers were often unable to meet the child's basic needs, resulting in CPS involvement, child removal, or termination of parental rights. Lack of knowledge of child development and child care have been identified as key concerns in studies examining mothers in care.^{8,23} The data from the current study suggest that mothers may continue to need support well past the age of 18.

For Class 3, the class at highest risk for a child's CPS report in the first three years of life, reports indicated the children might be in imminent danger. Risk for the children was related to the mothers' heightened comorbid substance abuse and mental health needs. Only one study has been published examining the process of adapting an evidence-based parenting intervention specifically for parents in care.²⁶

Additional work on effective programs is particularly important since this study among others shows that mothers in care hope to be good parents and want to prevent their children from experiencing maltreatment or entering the system.^{5,7} Importantly, the findings in all three classes of mothers suggest that a two-generation approach to intervention with both mother and child could help both to flourish.

SECOND **BARRIERS TO SERVICES**

This study identified barriers to service provision and reasons mothers have for opting out of extended foster care including (1) the desire to live with the father, (2) negative experiences in care, and (3) fear of CPS surveillance. Given the risks and needs identified and the likelihood of continuing CPS involvement, it seems especially important to link these mothers with voluntary community-based services and supports for families. The educational and employment requirements that youth must comply with to receive services as a non-minor dependent make it even more challenging for these young mothers to sustain access to services. The case records examined for this study, however, suggest that early termination of services was not due to difficulties with eligibility, but rather fear and distrust. Efforts to incorporate the perspectives of the mothers in the design and adaptation of interventions may increase the likelihood of engagement and participation in community-based service programs.²⁶

THIRD **UTILITY OF CASE RECORDS**

The information contained in the case narratives augmented what was known about these mother-child units and generated insights not available from structured data. Longitudinal studies examining pregnant and parenting mothers in care document challenges maintaining contact with their families over time.²⁷ Case narratives contain rich details about the mother's history and family needs and resiliencies.



The current study highlighted the significant life difficulties mothers in care and their children face and also offers hope that more effective practice strategies will improve outcomes for both mothers and their children. These findings enhance understanding of factors associated with the maltreatment of children born to mothers in foster care and demonstrate the importance of developing two-generation strategies to effectively address the needs of both the mother and child.

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