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Research report

# Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care

## Do Infants and Toddlers Leave Long-term Out-of-Home Care?

# Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in NSW

## Research Report No. 13

Do Infants and Toddlers Leave Long-term Out-of-Home Care?

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About the information in this report
All the analyses presented in this report are based on the July 2017 version of the Wave 1-3 unweighted data collected in face-to-face interviews with children, young people and caregivers; and FACS administrative data.

Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study Clearinghouse
All study publications including research reports, technical reports and bulletins can be found on the study webpage www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care

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# Preface

The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) is funded and managed by the New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services (FACS). It is the first large-scale prospective longitudinal study of children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) in Australia. Information on safety, permanency and wellbeing is being collected from various sources. The child developmental domains of interest are physical health, socio-emotional wellbeing and cognitive/learning ability.

The overall aim of this study is to collect detailed information about the life course development of children who enter OOHC for the first time and the factors that influence their development. The POCLS objectives are to:

- describe the characteristics, child protection history, development and wellbeing of children and young people at the time they enter OOHC for the first time
- describe the services, interventions and pathways for children and young people in OOHC, post restoration, post adoption and on leaving care at 18 years
- describe children's and young people's experiences while growing up in OOHC, post restoration, post adoption and on leaving care at 18 years
- understand the factors that influence the outcomes for children and young people who grow up in OOHC, are restored home, are adopted or leave care at 18 years
- inform policy and practice to strengthen the OOHC service system in NSW to improve the outcomes for children and young people in OOHC.

The POCLS is the first study to link data on children's child protection backgrounds, OOHC placements, health, education and offending held by multiple government agencies; and match it to first hand accounts from children, caregivers, caseworkers and teachers. The POCLS database will allow researchers to track children's trajectories and experiences from birth.

The population cohort is a census of all children and young people who entered OOHC for the first time in NSW over the 18 month period between May 2010 and October 2011 (n=4,126). A subset of those children and young people who went on to receive final Children's Court care and protection orders by April 2013 (2,828) were eligible to participate in the study. For more information about the study please visit the study webpage www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care.

The POCLS acknowledges and honours Aboriginal people as our First Peoples of NSW and is committed to working with the FACS Aboriginal Outcomes team to ensure that

Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities are supported and empowered to improve their life outcomes. The POCLS data asset will be used to improve how services and supports are designed and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal people and communities.

FACS recognises the importance of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) and Indigenous Data Governance (IDG) in the design, collection, analysis, dissemination and management of all data related to Aboriginal Australians. The POCLS is subject to ethics approval, including from the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW. FACS is currently in the process of scoping the development of IDS and IDG principles that will apply to future Aboriginal data creation, development, stewardship, analysis, dissemination and infrastructure. The POCLS will continue to collaborate with Aboriginal Peoples and will apply the FACS research governance principles once developed.

# 1 Introduction

In this paper, we examine the children in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) sample who left out-of-home care (OOHC) because they either went home to live with their parents (i.e. restoration), were placed with guardians, or because they were adopted.

From a social policy perspective, finding a family to raise a child outside the OOHC system is regarded as a positive outcome, all else being equal. The preference for raising children in the context of a family is rooted in two fundamental ideas. First, children do better overall when raised by their family. Families are a natural caregiving context (UN General Assembly, 1989). The social bonds that are so important to child wellbeing form most easily within the family, helping to preserve familial and cultural identity. Second, the role of government in raising children should be limited. Of course, there are times when families have difficulty providing the care their children need. The Government has a fundamental responsibility to protect vulnerable children when their families cannot. Balancing these two prerogatives is part of what makes operating a child welfare system so difficult. On the one hand, families must be supported; on the other hand, children must be protected. When OOHC is necessary, returning a child to his or her family reinforces the fundamental importance of the biological family. When restoration is not possible, guardianship and adoption are the other ways to support family care for children and young people. Because adoption and guardianship are outside the OOHC system, those options reinforce the idea that OOHC is a temporary solution.

Within this policy context, it is important to remember how the POCLS sample was selected (Paxman et al., 2014). The POCLS eligibility was based on whether a child or young person was placed on a final order by the Children's Court. This sampling strategy means that children who entered and left care in a relatively short period (i.e. before a long-term care and protection order was entered) are not included. To the extent that children enter care and then leave quickly, the processes of restoration, guardianship, or adoption following a short stay in OOHC are outside the scope of the main POCLS[1].

Nevertheless, the POCLS sample does provide insight at a crucial point along a child's pathway through care. Although a final order does not preclude the possibility of leaving care, the final order does imply that, in the eyes of the NSW Department of Family and

[1] Children in the cohort sample who left care before a final order was entered with the Children's Court are included in the part of the POCLS that relies on administrative records.

Community Services (FACS) and the Courts, a young person may spend considerable time in OOHC. If some children on final orders leave care, it is important to know who they are and identify the factors that differentiate children who leave care after a final order has been entered from those who do not. Knowing those distinctions may place the people responsible for making those decisions in a better position to act in accordance with a child's best interests.

# 2 Analysis

To carry out the study, we focused on children placed in OOHC between the ages of zero and three years. The POCLS includes children of all ages, but we elected in this case to focus on a developmentally distinct group, with the hope that reducing the developmental heterogeneity in the sample would make it easier to interpret the findings through a policy and practice lens. Similar analysis of other age groups is warranted, but beyond the scope of this specific study.

Because the POCLS design has been described elsewhere (Paxman et al., 2014), we do not describe how and why the data was collected. That said, we did approach the analysis with a goal in mind. As the POCLS is a prospective longitudinal study, we wanted to understand, looking forward from the time of the Wave I interview, what factors influenced whether a young child left care. Doing so aligns the analysis with what caseworkers might encounter in their work with children in OOHC today. Each year, children enter care. Some proportion of these have final orders entered with the Court on their behalf. In their work with children, caregivers and families, caseworkers are asked to assess whether children will leave care even though a final order has been filed. By looking forward from the Wave I interview, the hope is that the information provided will help caseworkers assess those chances with greater awareness of what might happen and adjust how they approach their work with children and families.

The analysis divides the POCLS data into four categories:

- Child demographics, maltreatment, and placement history
- Developmental status as measured by the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3)
- Caseworker contacts and family visitation
- Caregiver satisfaction.

For child demographics, we included age at entry to care, gender and Aboriginal status. Maltreatment history includes the predominant allegation type associated with the substantiated maltreatment report that immediately preceded placement and the

number of risk of significant harm (ROSH) reports prior to entry into OOHC. Placement history refers to the predominant care type (i.e. the setting where the child spent at least 50% of their time in OOHC) and the number of placement changes between entry into care and the Wave I interview. Measures of wellbeing were based on the (ASQ-3), which captures age-adjusted measures of communication, motor, problem solving, and personal social skills. The visitation-casework contacts domain considers the time spent by the child in contact with their parents plus their reaction to those visits; caseworker visits capture how much contact – either directly or over the phone – the caseworker had with the carer. The last domain considers the caregiver's satisfaction with services: was their caseworker reachable and helpful. The caregiver in this instance is the caregiver caring for the child at the time of the interview.

The dependent variable in the analysis is whether a child left care, regardless of the reason why. We do know from the data how children left care and we present that data in the Appendix. However, the number of children restored and adopted is small and the likelihood of finding statistically significant differences is similarly small. More importantly, the goal of the analysis is to show who might leave care rather than how. From a casework perspective, the pathway out of care is a decision the caseworker must explore, with the interests of a specific child and family in mind. Identifying a particular pathway – adoption versus guardianship versus restoration – pits one option against the other. From a caseworker's perspective, there is a choice, but it is a choice that must be informed by the details of a given case. The statistical analysis presented here provides guidance about the factors that might be considered but does not push the decision in a direction.

The presentation is in two parts. We start with a description of the sample using the variables described above. We follow that with the multivariate analysis that connects the child and other characteristics to the likelihood of leaving care. The measure of care leaving combines both the likelihood of leaving and the timing of when a child leaves care. To do this, we developed a person-period unit of analysis that divides the time a child spent in care *after the Wave I interview* into one-month intervals. Each interval is coded zero or one, depending on whether the child left care during that month. Each one-month interval is coded in its temporal order; in this way, we are able to examine how the probability of leaving care is affected by how long the child was in care (after the Wave I interview).

There are three broad questions or hypotheses underlying the analysis:

- Is leaving care affected by the passage of time going forward from the date of the Wave I interview? In other words, does the likelihood of leaving care change with the passage of time?

- Is leaving care affected by child characteristics, prior service history, visitation and casework, and caregiver satisfaction with services?
- Is the likelihood that a child (in this age group) will leave care different given the District Office that is managing the case?

The answers to these questions are found in the Sections below.

# 3 Findings

The findings are organised as follows. Table 1 provides a basic description of the sample using the categories of variables outlined previously. Again, the children included in the table are the children admitted to care between the ages of zero and three years for whom there was a final order entered with the Court. From the perspective of the Wave 1 survey, the caregivers of the children in this group would have been interviewed when the child was between nine and 36 months. Table 2 shows the number and percent of children who left care by the reason for leaving care. The Appendix tables, which combine Tables 1 and 2, show how children left care given the characteristics previously described.

The results of two multivariate models are found in Tables 3 and 4. Model 1 assesses time in care, characteristics of the child, history of contact with the child protection system, and the District Office that supervised the child's case. Model 2 is the same as Model 1, but with measures of child wellbeing, visitation, and caregiver satisfaction with services added to the analysis. Construction of the time in care variable has been described previously. The period from the survey date until the child left care or the most recent update of the POCLS data (i.e. the child's record was right censored) was divided into month-long intervals. Intervals one through 12 refer to the first year after the survey; intervals 13 through 24 refer to the second year post survey and so on. The characteristics of the child are captured in the row labels, which are self-explanatory. As for variation between the District Offices in the likelihood of leaving care, we capture this variation as a random effect. Because child cases are managed by caseworkers in the District Offices, the nested structure of the data becomes important. With a random effect in the model, we are asking whether the intercept, which is the average rate of care leaving net of other factors in the model, differs *between* District Offices.

There are two types of variables in the model. For the categorical variables, one category is used as a reference group. For example, with gender, males serve as the reference group. The likelihood of leaving care for females is compared with that for males; the odds ratio indicates whether leaving care is more or less likely. The continuous variables in the model – number of ROSH reports, for example – indicate the extent to which another ROSH report in the maltreatment history affects care

leaving in a population of zero and three year old children. As for the interpretation of the coefficients, odds ratios greater than one imply a higher likelihood of leaving care, whereas odds ratios that are less than one imply a lower likelihood of leaving care. As usual, statistical significance provides some guidance as to the importance of a given factor.

## 3.1 The sample

The POCLS sample of zero to three year-old children is described in Table 1. Highlights include the fact that most of the children (83%) were under the age of 1 at the time of admission. Males and females were equally divided. As for Aboriginal status, most of the children were non-Aboriginal, but the proportion of Aboriginal children (39%) is consistent with the over-representation of Aboriginal children in OOHC in NSW.

Regarding the history of contact with the child protection system (CPS), most children were reported to FACS for a variety of reasons other than just neglect or just physical abuse. More than half the children (58%) had three or fewer ROSH reports; 72% changed placement three or fewer times. Most children (60%) spent the majority of their time in OOHC (i.e. the predominant placement type) in foster care, whereas 33% lived with relatives.

According to caregivers, about 70% of the sample were following typical developmental patterns in the areas of communication and problem solving. Caregivers were also asked to comment on the frequency of visits with the mother and father, as well as the child's reaction to those visits. Contact with mothers was much more common – only 19% of the caregivers said there had been no contact with the mother, whereas the comparable figure for fathers was 47%. Overall, contact with mothers and fathers tended to happen less than once per month. Weekly visits with mothers were reported for 13% of the children; for fathers, 9% of the children had weekly visits. As for the child's response to those visits, caregivers reported that 15% of children responded positively to a visit with their mother. Visits with fathers were less likely to be positive, from the caregiver's perspective.

Caregivers were also asked about direct contact with the caseworker. Fewer carers reported having no direct or face-to-face contact than phone or email contact, but phone or email contact was more common overall. That said, three quarters of the caregivers were not dissatisfied with the level of caseworker contact (i.e. the caseworker's reachability and help from the caseworker).

**Table 1: Children in the POCLS sample admitted to care between the ages of 0-3 years**

| Characteristic | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Total children | 552 | 100 |
| Age at placement | | |
| 0 | 457 | 83 |
| 1 | 91 | 16 |
| 2 | 4 | 1 |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 276 | 50 |
| Female | 276 | 50 |
| Aboriginal status | | |
| Non-Aboriginal | 334 | 61 |
| Aboriginal | 218 | 39 |
| Primary reported issue | | |
| Neglect | 130 | 24 |
| Physical abuse | 158 | 29 |
| Mixed/Other | 264 | 48 |
| Number of ROSH reports | | |
| 3 or fewer | 322 | 58 |
| 4 or more | 230 | 42 |
| Total placement moves | | |
| 3 or fewer | 400 | 72 |
| 4 or more | 152 | 28 |
| Placement moves before survey | | |
| 0 moves | 156 | 28 |
| 1 move | 201 | 37 |
| 2 or more moves | 195 | 35 |
| Predominant placement type | | |
| Foster care | 331 | 60 |
| Relative/kinship care-Aboriginal | 34 | 6 |
| Relative/kinship care-non-Aboriginal | 149 | 27 |
| Other | 30 | 5 |
| Parents | 8 | 2 |
| Communication | | |
| Typical | 391 | 71 |
| Atypical | 152 | 28 |
| Missing | 9 | 2 |

| Characteristic | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Problem solving | | |
| Typical | 356 | 64 |
| Atypical | 188 | 34 |
| Missing | 8 | 1 |
| Contact with mother | | |
| No contact | 106 | 19 |
| Less than once a month | 224 | 41 |
| Monthly | 149 | 27 |
| Weekly | 73 | 13 |
| Contact with father | | |
| No contact | 262 | 47 |
| Less than once a month | 163 | 30 |
| Monthly | 79 | 14 |
| Weekly | 48 | 9 |
| Reaction after contact-mother | | |
| Neutral or negative | 471 | 85 |
| Positive | 81 | 15 |
| Reaction after contact-father | | |
| Neutral or negative | 499 | 90 |
| Positive | 53 | 10 |
| Direct contact with caseworker | | |
| Never | 66 | 12 |
| Less than once a month | 279 | 51 |
| About once a month | 108 | 20 |
| Once a fortnight | 56 | 10 |
| At least weekly | 43 | 8 |
| Email/phone contact with caseworker | | |
| Never | 143 | 26 |
| Less than once a month | 160 | 29 |
| About once a month | 79 | 14 |
| Once a fortnight | 81 | 15 |
| At least weekly | 89 | 16 |
| Caseworker reachability | | |
| Not dissatisfied | 418 | 76 |
| Dissatisfied | 134 | 24 |
| Help from caseworker | | |
| Not dissatisfied | 424 | 77 |
| Dissatisfied | 128 | 23 |

## 3.2 Leaving care

Table 2 shows the number and percent of children who left care by the reason for leaving care[2]. Because the POCLS sample includes children on final orders, the fact that most children (74%) were still in care is not unexpected. The fact that only 6% of the children (31 out of 552) were restored to their families is also expected. The decision to enter a long-term care and protection order with the Court on behalf of a child is a sign that individuals working with the child believe the likelihood of restoration is low. These findings are aligned with that assessment.

**Table 2: Number and percent of children who left care by reason for leaving care: children aged 0-3 years at entry into care**

| Reason for leaving care | n | of total % | of children leaving % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 552 | 100 | |
| Still in care | 407 | 74 | |
| Left care | 145 | 26 | 100 |
| Adoption | 11 | 2 | 8 |
| Guardianship | 95 | 17 | 66 |
| Restoration | 31 | 6 | 21 |
| Other | 8 | 1 | 6 |

Guardianship and adoption represent the two other ways children may leave care. Adoption (2%) is unlikely, and guardianship (17%) is the most common reason children in this group left care. Again, both outcomes reflect the prevailing policy and practice context. Of children who did leave care, 66% left care to live with a guardian.

## 3.3 Child characteristics, child protection history and leaving care

The results in Model 1 highlight important differences in the likelihood of leaving care. First, the findings indicate that leaving care is sensitive to the passage of time after the Wave I interview. To understand this, it is important to consider the intercept and the number of years post survey. The intercept (.0007) suggests that the base rate of leaving care within one year of the survey, in a population of children placed between the ages of zero and three years who are on final order, is quite low. To be clear, this

[2] The data for this analysis was taken from the POCLS database as of July 2017.

low probability refers to the children described using the reference categories: non-Aboriginal males admitted as an infant (under 1) who were in care for less than six months and placed in foster care, etc.

The post-survey variable shows an increase in the likelihood of leaving care with the passage of time, followed by a drop off. Relative to one year after the survey, the likelihood of leaving between months 13 and 24 would appear to be higher, although this difference is not significant. It is, however, in line with a rising probability of leaving care. During months 24 through 36 (three years post survey) and months 37 through 48 (four years post survey), the chances that a child will leave care are significantly higher than the chances within one year of the interview[3]. Thereafter (months 49 through 60), the likelihood of leaving care drops back to a level comparable to the chances that a child will leave care within one year of the survey.

Model 1 suggests that demographic characteristics of the child are not tied to differences in the probability of children in this specific group leaving care. There is no difference between males and females; Aboriginal children leave care at a somewhat slower rate, but this difference is *not* statistically significant. Children admitted to care before their first birthday are about as likely to leave care as the other children in this age group.

As for the history of contact with the child protection system, the number of placement changes prior the survey and the primary maltreatment issue (i.e. neglect versus abuse versus other maltreatment issues) have little bearing on the likelihood of leaving care. However, children with more ROSH reports appear less likely to leave care.

[3] The increase in the discharge rate three years and four years post survey would appear to be an artifact of a policy change that went into effect on 29 October 2014. On that day, relative and kinship carers who had an order from the Children's Court giving them full parental responsibility for a child or young person were transitioned to guardianship orders. More than 2,000 children in NSW exited OOHC via guardianship orders, and their relatives/kin became their guardians.

**Table 3: Effect of child characteristics and history of contact with child protection on leaving care**

| Variable | Model 1 | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate | Significance | Odds Ratio |
| Intercept | -7.21 | 0.000 | 0.0007 |
| Two years post survey | 0.4 | 0.191 | 1.49 |
| Three years post survey | 1.64 | 0.000 | 5.16 |
| Four years post survey | 1.01 | 0.002 | 2.75 |
| Five years post survey | -0.44 | 0.559 | 0.64 |
| Age at placement | | | |
| 1 | 0.09 | 0.710 | 1.09 |
| 2 | 0.17 | 0.877 | 1.19 |
| 0 | Reference | | |
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 0.05 | 0.779 | 1.05 |
| Male | Reference | | |
| Aboriginal status | | | |
| Aboriginal | -0.22 | .313 | 0.80 |
| Non-Aboriginal | Reference | | |
| Placements before survey | 0.03 | 0.710 | 1.03 |
| Primary reported issue | | | |
| Neglect | -0.18 | 0.459 | 0.84 |
| Physical abuse | -0.06 | 0.790 | 0.94 |
| Mixed/Other | Reference | | |
| Number of ROSH reports | -0.11 | 0.049 | 0.90 |
| Substantiated ROSH reports | 0.04 | 0.568 | 1.04 |
| Predominant care type | | | |
| Relative/kinship care-Aboriginal | 2.82 | 0.000 | 16.78 |
| Relative/kinship care-non-Aboriginal | 2.69 | 0.000 | 14.73 |
| Other | -0.61 | 0.550 | 0.54 |
| Parents | 2.35 | 0.000 | 10.49 |
| Foster care | Reference | | |
| **Total N** | **24,538** | | |
| **Event** | **134** | | |

The most important predictor of whether a child will leave care is the predominant type of placement[4]. Compared to children living in foster care, children who were living with relatives or kin, in either an Aboriginal relative/kinship placement or a non-Aboriginal relative/kinship placement, plus children living with parents who had been granted primary responsibility for the child, were much more likely to leave care. The large effect size must be understood in the context of the low probability of leaving care if a child is placed in OOHC: the effect is large, but the probability remains low overall. The details of how children in relative/kinship homes leave care are shown in Appendix Table 1. Most children in relative/kinship homes leave care to live with guardians. As noted in the footnote on page 10, the link between time in care and exits from OOHC *and* the strong association between children living with a guardian who leave care is likely an intended outcome of a policy change that took place toward the end of October in 2014. Based on the timing of their exits and where they were living when they left care, the POCLS sample was undoubtedly affected by the policy change, as the evidence here strongly suggests.

Lastly, the random effect, which would indicate whether there are significant differences between District Office in the likelihood of leaving care, could not be computed for this model. This indicates that there are no significant between-office differences in whether children will leave care.

## 3.4 Model 2

Model 2 in Table 4 repeats the analysis found in Model 1 but includes three new sets of variables: measures of the child's wellbeing as captured with the ASQ-3, measures of visitation between the caseworker and the carer and the child and parents, and measures of the caregiver's satisfaction with services. There are two measures from the ASQ-3: problem solving and communication[5]. In this age group, communication refers to an assessment of general oral communication; problem solving is concerned with positive approaches to learning. Questions in each domain are adjusted to reflect the age of the child at the time of the assessment. For the analysis here, we divided ASQ-3 scores into typical and atypical, with atypical scores being scores that encompass the monitor, clinical, and intensive services rating categories. Visits with the biological mother and father, as well as the child's reaction to those visits, are also included in

[4] Predominant care type refers to the type of placement where the child spent the majority of his or her time in OOHC. It is not necessarily the last placement before leaving care.

[5] We used the ASQ-3 gross motor, fine motor, and personal-social domains in other analyses, but their impact on leaving care leaving was not significant. For that reason, we did not include them in the final model.

Table 4. Caseworker contact with caregivers considers the frequency of both direct and phone contact. The caregiver's satisfaction with the caseworker's reachability and assistance was also considered.

Overall, the addition of these variables to the model does not alter the findings reported in Table 3. Age, gender, and Aboriginal status did not affect care leaving. The number of ROSH reports was important, but the predominant issue underlying the maltreatment reports (i.e. abuse, neglect, etc.) was not a determinant of whether the child left or stayed in OOHC. The type of placement remained the single most important predictor of whether a child would leave placement.

The findings from Table 4 do suggest that children with typical communication and typical problem solving skills left care at higher rates than children with atypical communication and problem solving abilities.

The findings, reported in Table 4, suggest that weekly visitation with the mother and the father, as reported by the carer, is associated with a higher likelihood of leaving care than no visits or less frequent visits, although the effect size of fathers (.078) was just above the threshold for statistical significance (.05). The child's reaction to those visits was not, however, linked to whether the child left care. Regarding contacts between the carer and the caseworker, no direct contact as compared to some contact with the mother, had no impact on care leaving. The carer's satisfaction with the support they received from their caseworker did not influence care leaving. Finally, as for District Office variation, when the random effect that would otherwise capture District Office variation in the average probability of leaving was added to the model, the model did not converge, in all likelihood because District Office specific counts of care leavers were too small.

## Table 4: Effect of child characteristics, history of contact with child protection and child wellbeing on leaving care

| Variable | Model 2 | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate | Significance | Odds ratio |
| Intercept | -7.94 | 0.000 | 0.00036 |
| Two years post survey | 0.42 | 0.186 | 1.52 |
| Three years post survey | 1.81 | 0.000 | 6.11 |
| Four years post survey | 1.21 | 0.000 | 3.35 |
| Five years post survey | -0.15 | 0.846 | 0.86 |
| Age at placement | | | |
| 1 | 0.05 | 0.869 | 1.05 |
| 2 | 0.42 | 0.696 | 1.52 |
| 0 | Reference | | |
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 0.08 | 0.677 | 1.08 |
| Male | Reference | | |
| Aboriginal status | | | |
| Aboriginal | -0.38 | 0.126 | 0.68 |
| Non-Aboriginal | Reference | | |
| Placements before survey | 0.15 | 0.090 | 1.16 |
| Primary reported issue | | | |
| Neglect | 0.06 | 0.817 | 1.06 |
| Physical abuse | 0.16 | 0.492 | 1.17 |
| Mixed/Other | Reference | | |
| Number of ROSH reports | -0.14 | 0.022 | 0.87 |
| Number of substantiated reports | 0.02 | 0.810 | 1.02 |
| Predominant care type | | | |
| Relative/kinship care-Aboriginal | 2.72 | 0.000 | 15.18 |
| Relative/kinship care- non-Aboriginal | 2.56 | 0.000 | 12.94 |
| Other | -0.6 | 0.559 | 0.55 |
| Parents | 2.48 | 0.000 | 11.94 |
| Foster care | Reference | | |
| Communication | | | |
| Typical | 0.52 | 0.042 | 1.68 |
| Atypical | Reference | | |
| Problem solving | | | |
| Typical | 0.61 | 0.010 | 1.84 |
| Atypical | Reference | | |
| | | | |

| Variable | Model 2 | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate | Significance | Odds ratio |
| Contact with biological mother | | | |
| Less than monthly | -0.39 | 0.242 | 0.68 |
| Monthly | 0.06 | 0.849 | 1.06 |
| Weekly or more | 0.67 | 0.051 | 1.95 |
| No contact/NA | Reference | | |
| Contact with biological father | | | |
| Less than monthly | -0.1 | 0.713 | 0.90 |
| Monthly | 0.13 | 0.713 | 1.14 |
| Weekly or more | 0.58 | 0.078 | 1.79 |
| No contact/NA | Reference | | |
| Contact reaction with mother | | | |
| Positive | -0.3 | 0.317 | 0.74 |
| Neutral/negative | Reference | | |
| Contact reaction with father | | | |
| Positive | -0.67 | 0.086 | 0.51 |
| Neutral/negative | Reference | | |
| Caseworker – direct contact | | | |
| Less than once a month | -0.23 | 0.4335 | 0.79 |
| About once a month | 0.04 | 0.9216 | 1.04 |
| Once a fortnight | -0.03 | 0.9483 | 0.97 |
| At least weekly | 0.04 | 0.9329 | 1.04 |
| No contact | Reference | | |
| Caseworker – phone/email contact | | | |
| Less than once a month | -0.01 | 0.9974 | 0.99 |
| About once a month | 0.09 | 0.7556 | 1.09 |
| Once a fortnight | -1.03 | 0.0106 | 0.36 |
| At least weekly | -0.98 | 0.0517 | 0.38 |
| No contact | Reference | | |
| Caseworker reachability | | | |
| Dissatisfied | 0.06 | 0.8347 | 1.06 |
| Not dissatisfied | Reference | | |
| Help from caseworker | | | |
| Dissatisfied | 0.31 | 0.2822 | 1.36 |
| Not dissatisfied | Reference | | |
| **Total N** | **24,126** | | |
| **Event** | **128** | | |

# 4 Summary

The focus of this brief was on the children from the POCLS sample who left care following the Wave I interview. Care leaving was relatively rare (24%), largely because the children in the POCLS sample were selected after a final order had been filed with the Court. Children on a final order are expected to stay in care for some time, an expectation that reflects the judgment of the individuals involved with the case. Having said that, the final order does not preclude the possibility of leaving care. Indeed, with so many children living in OOHC in New South Wales, the issue of who among the children on a long-term care and protection order might one day leave care has become an increasingly important consideration. When it is in the best interest of the child, leaving care to live with either their parents, a guardian, or an adoptive parent is viewed as a positive outcome. The policy and practice question is therefore whether children on long-term orders should be prepared for leaving care.

The findings point to a number of important observations. The first has to do with the elapsed time after the Wave I interview. Wave I interviews were conducted as soon as possible after the final order was established. We measured time in care following the initial interview in monthly increments until the child left care or through the date of the most recent POCLS database (June of 2017). We found that among children zero to three years of age who left care, the likelihood of leaving care was highest between three and four years post interview. For example, compared to one year post interview, the odds of leaving care during the third post interview year were about six times greater. Placement type was the other factor linked to whether a child left care. Compared to children in foster care, children in relative/kinship homes were much more likely to leave care. Children who spent some portion of the post interview years in the home of their parent were also more likely to leave care than children in foster care. These data are, however, confounded by policy changes that were implemented in October of 2014. Briefly, relatives were granted custody of their related children via guardianship orders. The timing of those changes coincides closely with the three and four year post interview impact of elapsed time on the likelihood of leaving care. Thus, the findings reinforce the impact the policy change had on children in the POCLS sample[6]. The findings also

[6] To further establish the impact of the policy change on care leaving, one could examine cohorts of children placed ahead of the POCLS sample to see if a similar increase in the exit rate is observed. Absent of a similar increase in care leaving at the three and four year mark, one might then conclude that the increase observed for the POCLS sample is most likely the result of the policy change. A study of post-POCLS cohorts would suggest whether the policy change has lingering effects.

reinforce the low rates of exit from OOHC overall once the final order has been entered with the court[7].

Regarding other factors in the model, the number of ROSH reports, ASQ-3 scores and regular visits with mothers and fathers were associated with differential rates of care leaving. ROSH reports reduced the likelihood of leaving care; typical ASQ scores in communication and problem solving increased the chances that a child would leave care. Contact with a child's mother and/or father had a positive impact on care leaving provided the contact happened on a weekly basis. Less frequent visitation did not have an impact - that is, less frequent visits neither increased nor slowed care leaving. The reaction of the child to contact with their mother and father did not affect care leaving.

Frequent contact between the caregiver and the caseworker was associated with a lower likelihood of leaving care, if the contact was by phone or email. Frequent contact with the caseworker may be a marker for children who are having difficulty. Those same difficulties may explain why children whose caregivers are in frequent contact with the caseworker are less likely to leave care.

Regarding policy and practice implications, the findings reported here suggest several directions. The first has to do with children living in relative/kinship homes. Although the children were on final orders, it does appear that some children leave care especially if they are living with relatives or kin. The question is whether leaving care ought to happen sooner and, if so, what supports families in that situation are likely to need after their time in care ends. Given how long it takes children to leave care if they do, careful consideration of the fiscal impact of keeping in children in care is one way to think through the policy options. Redirecting the cost of OOHC into support for relatives or kin outside the OOHC system may offer advantages to everyone involved.

The findings also suggest that the children who *do not leave care* are different from those children who do. Their history of contact with the child protection system is more complex in that they were the subject of more ROSH reports and likely experienced more placement moves. In addition, children who stayed in placement were reported by their caregivers to have atypical development, which is consistent with their more difficult placement history. If that is the case, then with the passage of time, the children who remain in care represent an important subset of the children on final orders - a subset of children who may need additional services. Insofar as the POCLS captures service utilisation, it will be important to assess in subsequent analyses whether children are getting services that address those needs.

The analysis presented here also points to the other ways the POCLS data might be used. The POCLS is oriented around the experience of children. As we have seen,

[7] According to the data in Appendix Table 1, 93% of the children in foster care, as opposed to relative/kinship care, were still in care as of the Wave 2 interview.

however, there are elements of their experience that deserve further analysis. For example, visitation and contacts with caregivers vary considerably. What characteristics of the caregiver and the child influence whether visitation is regular? One might imagine, for example, that visitation is more common with children and families that share characteristics. Are children whose development is aligned with their age group norms visited more regularly or less? Questions of this nature suggest how the POCLS can be used to understand the process and quality of care relative to children and their needs. Are children with so-called special needs getting more or less attention? Do caregivers who express higher levels of stress get more or less attention?

In this study, the question that emerges is how the decision to have children leave care might be made more expeditiously. There are two parts to the decisions: Should more children move from OOHC; into family care outside of OOHC and should the children who would leave care do so more quickly? The questions reflect to the two dimensions underlying practice: Should caseworkers put their effort toward making care leaving more likely, toward making care leaving happen sooner, or both? The message to practitioners, given the policy preference, is important. On the one hand, increasing the probability means that workers are affecting the chances that a child will leave care. On the other, the workers are putting their effort toward helping the children who will leave do so more quickly. Given how long after the Wave I interview the children who left care left care, there is a case for understanding how those decisions might be made more quickly. Given how few children leave care, there is also a case to be made for promoting restoration, guardianship, and adoption as alternatives to long-term OOHC.

# Appendix

The tables in the Appendix are intended to add detail to the analysis above by showing how children left care. As indicated earlier, the number of children returned to their parents and the number adopted is too small to study each exit type separately. Yet, there is some value to understanding how, for example, children who lived with guardians left care.

## Appendix Table 1: Number and percent of children who left care by reason for leaving care: children aged 0-3 years at entry into care

| Child, maltreatment, and placement history | Reason for leaving | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Adoption % | Guardianship % | Restoration % | Other % | Still in OOHC % | Total % |
| Entry age | | | | | | |
| 0 | 2 | 17 | 5 | 1 | 75 | 100 |
| 1 | np | 19 | 10 | np | 68 | 100 |
| 2 | np | np | np | np | np | 100 |
| Gender | | | | | | |
| Male | np | 16 | 5 | np | 75 | 100 |
| Female | np | 19 | 6 | np | 72 | 100 |
| Aboriginal status | | | | | | |
| Non-Aboriginal | np | 18 | 6 | np | 72 | 100 |
| Aboriginal | np | 17 | 5 | np | 77 | 100 |
| Predominant issue | | | | | | |
| Neglect | np | 13 | 7 | np | 76 | 100 |
| Physical abuse | np | 18 | 4 | np | 75 | 100 |
| Other reasons | np | 19 | 6 | np | 72 | 100 |
| Number of ROSH reports | | | | | | |
| 3 or fewer | np | 21 | 5 | np | 71 | 100 |
| 4 or more | np | 12 | 6 | np | 78 | 100 |
| Placement duration before survey date | | | | | | |
| Under 1 year | np | 17 | 9 | np | 71 | 100 |
| 1 to 2 years | 2 | 17 | 5 | 2 | 74 | 100 |
| Over 2 years | np | 21 | np | np | 79 | 100 |
| Placement duration after survey date | | | | | | |
| Under 2 years | np | 30 | 55 | 11 | np | 100 |
| Over 2 years | 2 | 16 | np | np | 82 | 100 |
| Primary placement type | | | | | | |
| Foster care | 2 | np | 4 | np | 93 | 100 |
| Relative/kinship: Aboriginal | np | 59 | np | np | 35 | 100 |
| Relative/kinship: non-Aboriginal | np | 50 | 11 | np | 37 | 100 |
| Other | np | np | np | np | 97 | 100 |
| Placement moves | | | | | | |
| 3 or fewer | 3 | 22 | 5 | 2 | 69 | 100 |
| 4 or more | np | 5 | 7 | np | 87 | 100 |

np = not publishable due to small cell sizes.

**Appendix Table 2: Number and percent of children who left care by reason for leaving care: children aged 0-3 years at entry into care**

| Child wellbeing | Reason for leaving | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Adoption % | Guardianship % | Restoration % | Other % | Still in OOHC % | Total % |
| Communication (ASQ-3) | | | | | | |
| Typical | 3 | 18 | 6 | 2 | 72 | 100 |
| Atypical | np | 13 | 5 | np | 81 | 100 |
| Gross motor (ASQ-3) | | | | | | |
| Typical | 2 | 19 | 6 | 2 | 72 | 100 |
| Atypical | np | 12 | 5 | np | 81 | 100 |
| Fine motor (ASQ-3) | | | | | | |
| Typical | 2 | 18 | 5 | 2 | 73 | 100 |
| Atypical | np | 15 | 7 | np | 76 | 100 |
| Problem solving (ASQ-3) | | | | | | |
| Typical | 3 | 19 | 4 | 2 | 72 | 100 |
| Atypical | np | 12 | 7 | np | 79 | 100 |
| Personal social (ASQ-3) | | | | | | |
| Typical | 2 | 17 | 6 | 2 | 73 | 100 |
| Atypical | np | 16 | 5 | np | 77 | 100 |

Children with missing data for the ASQ-3 are not included.
np = not publishable due to small cell sizes.

## Appendix Table 3: Number and percent of children who left care by reason for leaving care: children aged 0-3 years at entry into care

| Visitation and casework contacts | Reason for leaving | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Adoption % | Guardianship % | Restoration % | Other % | Still in OOHC | Total % |
| Contact with mother | | | | | | |
| No contact | np | 16 | np | np | 75 | 100 |
| Less than once a month | 2 | 12 | np | np | 84 | 100 |
| Monthly | np | 21 | 4 | np | 71 | 100 |
| Weekly | np | 26 | 27 | np | 44 | 100 |
| Contact with father | | | | | | |
| No contact | np | 17 | 4 | np | 74 | 100 |
| Less than once a month | np | 12 | np | np | 83 | 100 |
| Monthly | np | 16 | 8 | np | 72 | 100 |
| Weekly | np | 38 | 23 | np | 40 | 100 |
| Reaction after contact-mother | | | | | | |
| Neutral or negative | np | 16 | 6 | np | 76 | 100 |
| Positive | np | 26 | 6 | np | 62 | 100 |
| Reaction after contact-father | | | | | | |
| Neutral or negative | 2 | 16 | 6 | 1 | 75 | 100 |
| Positive | np | 30 | np | np | 60 | 100 |
| Face contact with caseworker | | | | | | |
| Never | np | 24 | np | np | 68 | 100 |
| Less than once a month | np | 20 | 5 | np | 72 | 100 |
| About once a month | np | 14 | np | np | 79 | 100 |
| Once a fortnight | np | np | 9 | np | 86 | 100 |
| At least weekly | np | 12 | 12 | np | 67 | 100 |
| Email/Phone with caseworker | | | | | | |
| Never | np | 19 | 13 | np | 66 | 100 |
| Less than once a month | np | 24 | 4 | np | 69 | 100 |
| About once a month | np | 24 | np | np | 66 | 100 |
| Once a fortnight | np | 9 | np | np | 86 | 100 |
| At least weekly | np | np | np | np | 89 | 100 |
| Caseworker reachability | | | | | | |
| Not dissatisfied | 2 | 17 | 5 | 2 | 75 | 100 |
| Dissatisfied | np | 19 | 9 | np | 69 | 100 |
| Help from caseworker | | | | | | |
| Not dissatisfied | 2 | 17 | 4 | 2 | 75 | 100 |
| Dissatisfied | np | 20 | 9 | np | 68 | 100 |

np = not publishable due to small cell sizes.

# References

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