# Foster care trends in a Western Australian non-government family welfare agency 1991-1999

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*Wanslea Family Services (WFS), a non-government family welfare agency in Perth, has provided foster care placements for the Western Australian Department of Family and Children's Services for many years. Data about these children and their families is held in a comprehensive electronic database that covers the period 1991-1999. This 9-year data set is unique in Western Australia and may be unique nationally.*

*An analysis of this data indicates no significant variation across the nine year period for age at admission of children to foster care. In contrast, a statistically significant cubic trend was found for length of episode of care indicating that the duration of foster care placements significantly varied across the nine year period. Analyses of gender for both age at admission and length of foster care showed significant differences but only for particular years. In 1995 females were significantly younger than males while in 1998 males were significantly younger than females. Only in 1998 was length of episode of care significant when it was shorter for males than females. Possible explanations for these results are discussed.*

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In 1991 the Western Australian Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) (known then as the Department of Community Welfare), as a first step in updating their data collection system about children in out-of-home care, engaged consultants to create an electronic reporting system. This system was then used by all non-government agencies to submit monthly returns to the department. While innovative at the time, the system proved to be operationally less than satisfactory and after a limited number of years its use was discontinued. Fortunately, the Executive Director of Wanslea Family Services (WFS) recognised the value of this data and made certain that WFS maintained the system until July 1999. This has resulted in WFS holding data about the foster children the agency served from 1991 to 1999. No other non-government agency in Western Australia has such a comprehensive data set about episodes of foster care. This data set may also be the only one of its kind in existence in Australia.

The existence of the data set became known to the first author of this paper during the course of discussions with the Executive Director of WFS about the potential for collaborative research into foster care services. This led to an Edith Cowan University (ECU) – Wanslea Family Services (WFS) research project that has involved subjecting the data to an analysis designed to examine the nature of the WFS foster care population across these years.

This analysis is similar, although on a smaller scale, to that undertaken by Goerge, Wulcyn and Harden (1996) in the US. They compiled statistics on the entire foster care population of a number of states, compared these statistics among states, and examined state and comparative trends over a ten-year period 1983-1993. Their data was drawn from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive maintained by Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The data used covered five states — California, Illinois, Michigan, New York and Texas — and represented almost half of the US foster care population across the given time period.

## RESEARCH PLAN

The aim of the WFS project was to translate their Db2 software based 'career path' data set into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) files so that the data could be subjected to a range of statistical analyses. Initially, the expectation was that the files would have to be converted manually. This proved not to be the case as a doctoral student with considerable computing skills achieved the task electronically with a significant saving of time. The subsequent data set contains details of 4,923 episodes of foster care.

Once this data was in SPSS format the issue of which type of analysis to use came to the fore. The decision was to use trend analysis. This statistical process uses analysis of variance (ANOVA) and in essence is a special case involving the planned comparisons of means. That is, the means of the first year cohort on a series of variables are established and then compared against the results for the subsequent years (Coakes & Steed, 1999). SPSS then displays the results as a graph that shows the linear, quadratic or cubic trends in the data. A linear trend indicates a consistent increase or

**Table 1**
**Admissions to Foster Care 1991-1999 (n = 4923)**

| Year of Admission | No. of Male Admissions | No. of Female Admissions | Total No. of Admissions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1991 | 146 | 144 | 290 |
| 1992 | 360 | 310 | 670 |
| 1993 | 438 | 309 | 747 |
| 1994 | 359 | 303 | 662 |
| 1995 | 290 | 236 | 526 |
| 1996 | 261 | 259 | 520 |
| 1997 | 274 | 222 | 496 |
| 1998 | 242 | 237 | 479 |
| 1999 | 274 | 259 | 533 |

decrease in the means plotted. In a quadratic trend the means plotted either increase or decrease and then increase. Cubic trends are when the shape of the curve increases and decreases consistently.

Once this was agreed, it was then necessary to select the key variables and time periods against which to undertake this analysis. The decision was made to analyse the admissions over the total nine-year period 1991-1999. The variables selected for this initial analysis were the child's age at time of placement, the duration of the placement or episode length, and gender.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the distribution of admissions to foster care across the nine year period 1991-1999.

The first graph, Figure 1, shows the results of the analysis in relation to age at admission.

A trend analysis including males and females together was conducted. The Levine test for homogeneity of variance was significant ($p < .001$) indicating that the statistical assumption that the data in each cell (year) has equal variance had been violated (SPSS, 1999). Given that this assumption had been violated, the trend analysis results were assessed at a more conservative alpha level of .001 (Coakes & Steed, 1999). The ANOVA summary table showed that there was no significant variation in age of admission across the nine year period ($F(8,4914) = 1.02$; $p > .001$).

The next graph, figure 2, shows the results of a similar analysis for episode length of both male and female children admitted to foster care. This analysis was performed in order to examine whether there was any significant trend in the length of the episodes of care.

This figure shows a cubic trend in terms of the length of stay of both male and female children admitted to foster care during the period 1991-1999. Again, the Levine test for homogeneity of variance was significant ($p < .001$) indicating that the test assumption had again been violated. As a result the data was interpreted at a more stringent alpha level of .001 as suggested by Coakes and Steed (1999). The analysis then showed that there was significant difference across the nine year period in regard to the length of episodes of care ($F(8,4914) = 8.65$; $p < .001$). Inspection of the cubic trend showed that it was statistically significant ($F(1,4914) = 24.50$; $p < .001$) indicating that the mean episode length consistently increased and decreased between 1991 and 1999.

Finally, in order to explore the effects of gender on age of admission and episode length, independent sample t-tests (Coakes & Steed, 1999) were performed for each of the nine years. The results indicated that for 1995 and 1998 gender was a statistically significant influence on age of admission. In 1995 females (mean = 4.78 years) were significantly younger than males (mean = 5.62 years) ($t(524) = 2.60$; $p < .05$). Yet, in 1998 males (mean = 4.75 years) were significantly younger than females (mean 5.42 years) ($t(477) = 1.99$; $p < .05$). For length of episode of care, there was also a significant difference between males and females only in 1998 ($t(411.69) = 2.04$; $p < .05$). In this year, males (mean 10.23 days) were on average in foster care for a significantly shorter period of time than females (mean = 14.42 days). For the remaining years, there was no significant difference between males and females regarding length of episode in care.

**Figure 1 Mean age on admission by gender 1991-1999**

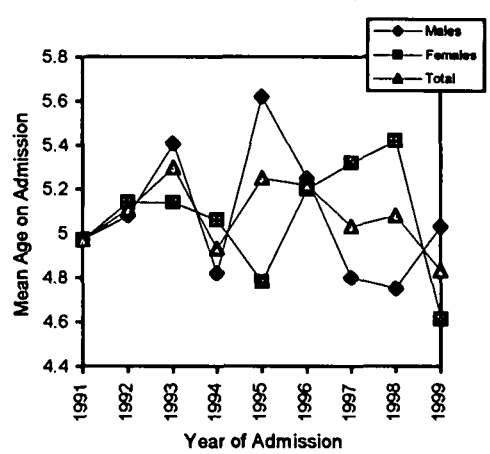
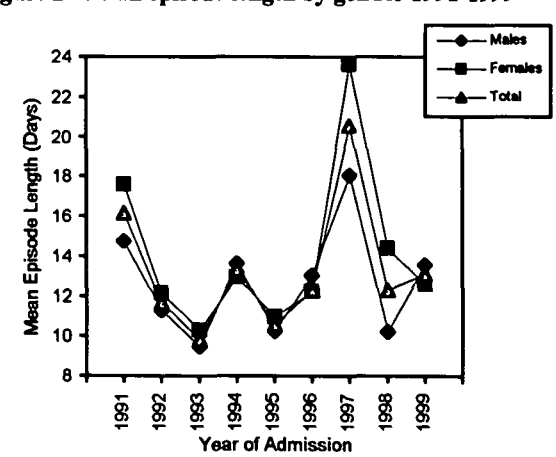



**Figure 2 Mean episode length by gender 1991-1999**



## WHY THE VARIATION?

These figures show that over the time period in question the WFS foster care population on the three variables – gender, age and episode length – was subject to variation. This is interesting as it raises some questions about the dynamics of the foster care population.

The questions that Figure 1 raises are as follows:

- Why is age on admission to foster care inconsistent for males and females?
- Are departmental child care and protection policies and practices contributing to these variations?

In considering these issues it is worth noting a number of policy and practice developments which may go some way to explaining these results. Permanency planning, family preservation and family reunification philosophies may have influenced foster care trends in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. For example, permanency planning thinking was evident in Western Australia throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s (Lahti, Green, Emien, Clarkson, Quentin, Kuehnet & Casciato, 1978; McCotter & Oznan, 1981). Similarly, by the mid 1990s, proponents of family preservation strategies had acquired considerable influence (Whittaker, Kinney, Tracey & Booth, 1990; Ainsworth, 1993; Scott, 1993; Bath, 1994; Bath & Haapaala, 1994). Across the same time period family reunification philosophies also had an impact on professional decision-making (Maluccio, Warsh & Pine, 1993, Ainsworth & Maluccio, 1998a). These philosophies, especially family preservation and the linked family reunification approach, endorsed strategies that were designed to prevent children being placed in foster care as well as the early return of children from foster care to their birth parents. These policies may have kept children out of foster care until they were older than might have been the case in an earlier era and have had a differential impact on male and female children, although why this should be the case is hard to explain.

Figure 2 raises similar questions about length of each episode of foster care:

- Why is there such a variation across time in the length of foster care episodes?
- Why does episode length vary for males and females?
- Are departmental child care and protection policies and practices contributing to these variations?

These questions may also be understood by reference to the policy and practices issues, permanency planning, family preservation and family reunification discussed above in relation to the age of admission of children to foster care. Moreover, family preservation and family reunification places great store on the maintenance of family connectedness and a reduction in the duration of all forms of out-of-home care, foster care or group care placements (Ainsworth, 1997). Why there was a significant variation in 1998 in the length of the episode of care between females and males is largely unexplained.

*Practice needs to influence policy as much as policy needs to influence practice. We think that this data points to the importance of making decisions that are based on evidence about what is actually happening at agency and practitioner level.*

## LIMITATIONS

This is data from one agency and in that regard the results should not be viewed as representing foster care trends in all non-government agencies in Western Australia. Each agency needs to do its own analysis. So far the WFS data has only been subjected to very limited analysis and the variables selected may in fact not be the most significant. More detailed exploration of this data using regression techniques (Coakes & Steed, 1999) is needed to quantify the influence of these and other variables, ie, family structure, on these trends.

## DISCUSSION

We can of course speculate about the way in which other factors may drive all of these trends. These factors may include external issues such as media publicity that shapes public opinion (Scott, 1995). There are also internal factors such as budgetary constraints, difficulty in recruiting and retaining foster carers and scarcity of placements that have driven developments such as kinship care (Ainsworth & Maluccio, 1998b). All of these factors may have a subliminal impact on practitioners' decision-making as they consider placing a child in foster care.

Practitioners in the field may take the view that government policy controls the way decisions are made in relation to admissions to out-of-home care. Of course, that is often the case. This data may merely be demonstrating some of the impacts of these policies and policy changes across time on a particular foster care agency. Further examination of this data and consideration of the issues raised may allow this evidence from practice to have an influence at a policy level. Practice needs to influence policy as much as policy needs to influence practice. We think that this data points to the importance of making decisions that are based on evidence about what is actually happening at agency and practitioner level.

## WHAT NEXT?

For WFS the next step is the completion of trend analysis on these and other variables, ie, family characteristics, on an annual basis. In this way WFS can be increasingly sensitive to changes in the nature of the foster care population that it serves and respond accordingly. Changes in the foster care population are important, as they should influence both policy and practice. Knowledge of any changes may have implications for who is recruited as foster carers and the resources that need to be made available by the agency to guarantee stability of placements. This knowledge may also contribute to the analysis of the factors that are influencing placement decisions and hopefully

support a more consistent approach to these decisions.

This type of analysis provides important evidence that the non-government sector can use in contract negotiations with state departments. It is especially valuable as state departments rarely collect this kind of data. From another perspective the data demonstrates the value for the non-government sector of computerising and analysing administrative data sets. In a human services contracting environment, the importance of doing so cannot be over emphasised.

Following this successful industry-university cooperation, two other foster care studies have been launched. The first is an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study – 'Family types and the careers of foster families: Who stays and who leaves?' The second project that has recently been submitted for funding is called 'Siblings in out-of-home care: Together or separate?'. Collectively these projects represent a significant Australian foster care research initiative. ♦

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APPRECIATION

The authors wish to express appreciation to Jan Pullen who from 1991to 1999 carefully guarded the integrity of the 'career path' database

THIS RESEARCH WAS SUPPORTED BY A GRANT FROM THE SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL, CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY STUDIES AT EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY, PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA.