

# Impact of Emergency Shelter Utilization and Kinship Involvement on Children's Behavioral Outcomes

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## Introduction

Children involved in the child welfare system may be placed in emergency shelter care while awaiting a more permanent placement such as a foster home or group home. The temporary nature of emergency shelter care equates to placement insecurity. This insecurity, along with the separation from community supports and kinship connections, places these children at notable risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties. The Child Welfare League of America and numerous legal cases have highlighted inappropriate emergency shelter care practices (e.g., overcrowding, abuse, stays greater than 6 months, unsanitary conditions). Yet, there is minimal research exploring the impact of these placements on children's long-term well-being.

Research has found that kinship involvement can mitigate the potential negative impact of social isolation associated with placement in congregate care settings (e.g., group homes or residential treatment centers). Further, in non-foster care samples, kinship involvement can protect against the development of externalizing behaviors and internalizing symptoms. However, no research has investigated the impact of kinship involvement on the well-being of children in emergency shelter care.

## Research Questions

The current longitudinal study sought to examine the impact of an initial placement in an emergency shelter on children's long-term emotional (internalizing) and behavioral (externalizing) outcomes. In addition, the researchers sought to explore if kinship involvement moderated the effect of shelter placement on these outcomes. For the purposes of this study, kinship involvement included contact with kin and fictive kin.

## Study Sample

The study included 282 children (55.3% male and 43.7% female) between the ages of 6 and 13 (average age 9.9 years) who entered the care of the Department of Child and Family Services in Cook and Will counties in Illinois between October 2011 and June 2014. To be included in the sample, the children had to be in foster care a minimum of 6 months, thereby allowing for three assessment points. The sample consisted of 60.5% African American, 17.4% Multi-Racial, 14.6% Latino, and 7.5% Caucasian or Asian American children.

## Findings

Overall, the researchers found that shelter placement was not associated with long-term internalizing or externalizing outcomes.

The study found that children who experienced emergency shelter care (39.6% of the sample) had less kinship involvement and more externalizing behaviors than those who did not experience emergency shelter care. This is consistent with the expectation that children with family support and fewer behavioral difficulties are less likely to be placed in shelter care. The number of days spent in a shelter was not associated with negative outcomes, suggesting that the placement itself, and not the amount of time there, is most relevant.

Emergency shelter care placement was also found to be a risk factor for behavioral maladjustment in the short term; however, greater kinship involvement was found to buffer this effect. For children who had less kinship involvement, shelter placement was associated with more internalizing difficulties.

## Recommendations

Efforts should be made to promote kinship involvement (including fictive kin networks) with children who are placed in emergency shelter care. Shelter agencies can learn from congregate care agencies about ways to improve involvement of a child's kinship network. In addition, caseworkers can make greater efforts to connect with family of children in these situations.

## Bottom Line

Kinship involvement with children who experience shelter care placements may protect against negative outcomes.

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