

FOSTER CHILDREN IN A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

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P R E F A C E

The Casey Family Program is a privately funded agency that continues to grow in size and is now located in more than a dozen western states. The major emphasis of its service program involves the maintenance of children in long-term foster family homes. The research described in this volume was commissioned by the agency as part of a program of self-evaluation.

It is the hope of the authors that this book contribute to the cumulative scientific information about children in foster care. In addition to its many substantive findings, we are hopeful that the model of life course analysis that underlies our investigation will prove attractive to agencies and scholars concerned with child welfare services. It is also important that funding sources be willing to entertain supporting the "long distance runners" among researchers who are willing to tie up their scholarly careers to such extended investigations.

One of the authors, David Fanshel, was approached by The Casey Family Program at Columbia University in late 1983 with the proposal that he consider undertaking a study of outcomes of the service effort to date. A relatively new program on the child welfare scene, the first children had been accepted into care in 1966. With the 20th anniversary of the founding of the agency rapidly approaching, there was interest expressed by the board of trustees in an objective study of outcomes, with inadequacies, as well as achievements, to be revealed. The ultimate purpose of the research was to enhance the quality of service to the children. The study got fully under way

in September 1984 and was funded for three continuous years.

Fanshel had been approached at the suggestion of Joseph H. Reid, former executive director of the Child Welfare League of America. He had been a key consultant when the program was originally conceived and founded. He was of the opinion that Fanshel's prior experience in conducting a well-known longitudinal study of foster children in New York City provided good background for a research initiative with The Casey Family Program.

The authors recognize that compromises in research design have been made in the effort to span the lifetimes of our subjects and that these may give some of our readers pause. The use of content analysis to recreate measures of the preplacement histories of the subjects and the course of their lives as seen at intake into the program, their experiences while in care and the circumstances of their exit from the program's care involved a major investment of project funds and probably represents as ambitious a use of this technique as has yet been reported in studies of social programs. In our view the method has paid off handsomely and allowed us to experience the equivalent of a longitudinal investigation without having to wait decades to accumulate the kind of life course data we have created through coding case record protocols. Nevertheless, we look forward to the development of longitudinal data bases for foster children in which the data collection takes place prospectively in a real-time mode.

The research was carried out collaboratively by the three authors. While each of us brought to the occasion specialized skills in subject matter expertise, statistical analysis, and computer programming, the analysis and interpretation of the data and the preparation of the volume in its final form represent a combined effort. Ordering of names is not intended to signify priority in authorship.

D.F.
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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

We wish to thank The Casey Family Program for making possible a rewarding research experience. The board of directors of the agency contracted for this research as part of a program of self-evaluation. They provided generous financial support and allowed the researchers complete freedom in the conduct of the study and in the interpretation of findings.

The Casey Family Program division directors were cooperative in arranging for the shipment of records and in answering all manner of inquiry from the research staff. The smooth exchange of materials owes much to their helpfulness. Arthur R. Dodson was helpful and supportive, especially in the defining stage of the study, in his role as executive director of the agency.

Appreciation is owed to the case readers who performed the arduous content analysis task requiring their reading of more than six hundred case records and filling out the long schedule required for each case. Henry Ilian, Jeanne Bertrand-Finch, Mary Fitzpatrick, and Margaret Schmidt showed a high degree of professionalism and concern for the children about whom they were reading.

Amelia Chu, research assistant throughout the project, performed demanding research tasks such as coding complex material, data entry, and computer programming work with skill and dedication. Angela Sinanian carried the main responsibility for computer entry of coded data and did this with efficiency and impressive accuracy.

Jaime Alvelo directed the field operations of the follow-up study in

Seattle and Yakima in Washington. He collaborated with Fanshel in the construction of the follow-up interviewing schedule and in its field testing. He hired and trained the four interviewers who conducted the interviews with the former wards of the program. In order to oversee the study, he established temporary residence in Seattle. The success of the follow-up study owes much to the skill and commitment he brought to the research enterprise. His performance was at the highest level.

The interviewers employed in the follow-up study were Sid Copeland, Patti Gorman, Joan K. Heinmiller, and Mary L. Kline. Making contact with the subjects and securing their participation was a crucial task and this was carried out in a resourceful manner. Our in-depth analysis of the data secured from the interviews shows a coherence of information that reinforces our sense of the professionalism that guided the interviewing process.

Jeanne Bertrand-Finch gave generously of her time in reading all drafts of the manuscript. She provided perspectives for improvement in writing based upon her rich practice experience in child welfare and we found her comments most useful. She is not, of course, responsible for our final formulations of the many issues explored with her.

Dr. Tenshang Joh studied the performance of factor analysis on data from linear recursive path models. His results provided important guidance on the interpretation of the factor analyses discussed in chapters 8 and 9. Dr. Qimei He wrote the program that calculated the intraclass correlation coefficient and estimated the correlation of the errors of measurement of our data. He also performed simulations and numerical calculations that examined the experience of using factor analysis as an index construction strategy. These calculations studied a much less complex strategy than the one described in chapter 2, but they also led to important insights and increased confidence in the results we report in this book.

The study was conducted at the Columbia University School of Social Work, which provided a full measure of support in a variety of services. Dean George Brager and his successor Dean Ronald Feldmen were most encouraging as were the faculty and doctoral students with whom the work was discussed at various times. The climate for productive work could not have been better.

We feel indebted to the two anonymous readers who read the earlier draft of the manuscript for Columbia University Press. They provided insightful suggestions and criticisms in their comments. These were helpful to us in our further writing.

A large measure of thanks is owed to the former wards of The Casey

Family Program who agreed to participate in research interviews in two cities in the state of Washington, Seattle and Yakima. They furnished us with critical data that proved invaluable in the overall study. Those who carry responsibility for the care of foster children are likely to find their insights deepened by the direct quotations from the subjects provided in chapter 10.

FOSTER CHILDREN IN A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

CHAPTER ONE

Doing Good For Children: A Man Named Jim Casey

One day in 1965, an immaculate but otherwise simple-looking man appeared at the offices of the Child Welfare League of America on Irving Place in New York City. Well beyond his seventieth year, he had an open, intelligent face that easily broke into a broad smile. He browsed through the pamphlets about child welfare on display in the main entrance room and proceeded to ask Regina Cavanagh, the receptionist, about the purposes of the League and the needs of the children it represented. The visitor was obviously someone who was self-assured and skilled in dealing with strangers.

Something about the manner in which he presented himself and the way he posed questions about failing children suggested that he was not engaged in idle pursuit. The receptionist sensed that the visitor was a man organizing himself to become engaged in a project. She passed along a suggestion to the secretary of Joseph H. Reid, the executive director of the League, that he might want to spend a few minutes with a man who had dropped in, named James Emmet Casey, who had many questions to ask and had hinted at having funds to invest in a child welfare program of some sort. Reid agreed to see the gentleman—who, he later learned, was always called Jim Casey by those who knew him—for a short encounter. Little did he know that this meeting would be the first of many between them and that they would be planning for a new foster care service that would come to have national significance.

Although younger by several decades, Joseph Reid was the kind of

man who could appeal to Jim Casey because of his recognized leadership qualities in his chosen field, his ease in human relationships, and the absence of pretentiousness in his makeup. Both men were pleased to find they had common roots in Seattle, Washington, where Casey had started his business activity and where Reid had developed his career as a social worker in a children's residential treatment facility. Reid found the older man's questions about children in trouble interesting and his views intelligent. At some point Reid learned that the stranger who had dropped in was the president of United Parcel Service, and he became alert to the fact that Casey had resources to invest in an innovative new service program.

Jim Casey personified the American success story, a veritable Horatio Alger figure on the American business landscape. Born in Nevada in 1888, he was brought to Seattle by his family while still an infant. Because of the illness of his father, Jim Casey began to help support his family when he was only eleven years old. With his brothers, he had started a messenger service in Seattle in 1907 in very modest basement quarters. His company began by delivering packages on bicycles for local clothing stores and other merchants. After a brief sojourn away from Seattle prospecting, Casey returned to the arena of messenger work. By the time he was thirty years old, he had become the prime mover in the development of what was to become a vast company whose name and brown delivery vans—always neatly maintained in accordance with his precepts—were to become a well-established institution in the United States. In guiding the growth of the United Parcel Service, Casey developed a national reputation as an unusually skilled business manager, one who was able to infuse his organization with a high standard of performance. Among other innovations, he was one of the first to develop profit-sharing programs.

Casey and his two brothers and sister had long talked about establishing some kind of a child welfare service for deprived children as the type of memorial to their mother, Annie Casey, best suited to represent her personal attributes. They were united in the desire to honor her memory by funding a program that would secure the benefits of strong family life for problem-ridden children. At the time he visited the offices of the Child Welfare League of America, Jim Casey was in a position to influence the distribution of very substantial charitable funds accumulated in an endowment derived from earnings of the United Parcel Service.

CONCERN FOR CHILDREN WITH PROBLEMS

Jim Casey arrived with a plan in his mind and a detailed outline of that plan in his pocket, a plan to assist needy children in becoming useful United States citizens. His interests focused upon children moving into their adolescent years who were showing problems of delinquency or were otherwise on the road to becoming involved in deviant careers. Coming from a relatively deprived background himself, Casey felt a sense of sympathy as he came to understand that youthful antisocial behavior was rooted in poverty, family break-up, and the failure of society to welcome these youngsters into the mainstream of opportunity. He and his siblings particularly appreciated the strong family life they had been exposed to in their formative years even in times of financial adversity.

Joseph Reid knew the problems of children deprived of the care of functioning families as well as any person in the United States. He had used his influence to secure funding of a major national study by the League of the foster care system. Henry S. Maas, a professor at the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley, directed a research team that studied the conditions of foster children in nine communities. The book reporting the results of the study, *Children in Need of Parents*, had an important impact when it was published and is still regarded as a landmark investigation in child welfare (Maas and Engler 1959). While the report of the research was quite balanced and careful in its assessment of the evidence, the findings tended to be discouraging in the description of many children captured for extended periods in a foster care system that was intended to provide temporary placements.

Maas and Engler found that a high proportion of the foster children had been abandoned by their parents, were unvisited and in a state of limbo. The children who remained in foster care placement for more extended periods showed significantly more behavioral problems than those who had been in care for shorter periods (Fanshel and Maas 1962). The overall view was that the welfare of deprived children was being undermined by a seemingly mindless and poorly managed system. The study findings put foster care services under a cloud of suspicion as not serving children well, and reactions to these findings helped launch the sustained movement for reform that took place in the years that followed.

Joseph Reid and Jim Casey came to a shared point of view about the new program that was to be brought into being. Jim Casey left Reid with the same plan in his mind and in his pocket. But he left

with something additional, which was of great importance to Jim Casey—approval and encouragement from someone knowledgeable in the field of child welfare. He then telephoned to Seattle requesting that the next steps be completed to put The Casey Family Program in operation.

It made sense to both men that an agency be established in Seattle that would offer care in foster family homes to children deprived of their families. This effort would reflect Reid's conviction that, despite the negative findings of the Maas and Engler study, extended placement in foster care need not constitute an unsuitable environment for a child if return to the biological parents was not possible and adoption was ruled out as a likely alternative because of the child's age or other factors. This was in accord with Jim Casey's view that the provision by an agency of a service that offered strong family life could be a powerful force in the rescue of children who were on a downward spiral because they had the misfortune of having been born to families replete with serious problems.

In his summary recommendations written as a final chapter in the Maas and Engler book, Reid had set forth the perspective that long-term foster care was a necessary service for some children:

It is not possible to overemphasize the importance of every child welfare agency's concentrating on the family as a whole and not the individual child in care. However, we must also face the fact that there are thousands of children in care for whom there is a family in name only and for whom the parents, because of their own irremediable inadequacies, will never be able to function fully. Therefore, for thousands of children foster care is preferable to their being in their own homes, for there simply is no own home and no possibility for one. Just as communities must make certain that there are adequate preventive services and services for work with parents, they must also make certain that they recognize the need for strong professional foster care services for those children unfortunate enough to be born to parents who can never fulfill their full parental responsibility (1959:338–389).

It was Reid's view that teenagers with unstable life histories who were showing problems in the community could be considered for placement with foster families if an agency had the assets to deliver good service. Recruitment of foster families who had the innate capacity to understand and tolerate the behavior of these children or who could be helped to achieve this was an essential ingredient of such a service program. Reid had made a special point of highlighting the role of foster parents in this context:

A concerted effort is also needed to discover—in part through more intensive and systematic study and in part through better use of existing knowledge—the kinds of foster parents who are able to provide a relatively enduring family life for children with emotional difficulties. Identifying the motivation that makes of parents good foster parents and then seeking out such families can do much to reduce the number of re-placements in foster care which emotionally disturbed children are subjected to and the extent of disturbance among such children which is reinforced by their repeated changes in homes. We need to determine what services foster parents require in order to be more accepting of these children, including such mundane things as regular baby-sitting services financed by the agency to enable foster parents to have sufficient freedom to maintain their own emotional health (1959:390).

Reid also pointed to the need for professional social work staff, with capacity to work therapeutically with the children and supportively with the foster families, as a vital aspect of such a service organization.

Reid found that Jim Casey had quite well formulated ideas about what would be required to make a new program successful. His thinking about service delivery issues in this area had the strength of solid experience in building a successful corporation in which considerable initiative was encouraged at the local level and where employees were offered stable employment and financial incentives for years of loyal service.

AN AGENCY COMES INTO BEING

The Casey Family Program was established in Seattle, Washington as a privately endowed social service agency. It accepted its first child into care in 1966. The aim of the program, as developed in the discussions between Jim Casey and Joseph Reid, was to provide “quality planned long-term foster care for children and youth when this is the best permanent plan.” This aim has guided the agency since its inception. Thus, the agency has primarily placed children in foster boarding home care who have little prospect of being reunited with their natural families. It has sought to serve children who are victimized and troubled and so are likely to represent a challenge to caretakers.¹

The agency was to be funded entirely from private sources, ruling out public subsidy as a basis for program support.² The plan was to secure the best trained social work staff available, to compensate them adequately, and to assign caseloads of reasonable size. Foster

parents were to be recruited with an aim of obtaining strong families, already successful with their own children, to care for upset youngsters without families they could count on. The agency was to be accredited by the appropriate standard setting organizations to ensure the highest quality of service. The agency's substantial endowment was to be treated as an available resource for children when a child's identified needs required purchase of specialized services. Such needs might be in the areas of health, educational remediation, recreation, higher education, psychotherapeutic treatment, interim institutional care for children who were having a difficult experience in foster home placement, or in other areas.

Those well informed about child welfare services may question whether the service delivery model that guides The Casey Family Program is appreciably different from what is offered by other child welfare agencies providing foster family care as a basic service to children. Although in many ways what is being offered resembles foster family care placement services conventionally practiced throughout the United States, the kinds of children to be served are not "conventional" foster children. They represent a more challenging group of youngsters, most of whom have been in a large number of placements in the past and are, therefore, at fairly high risk in any subsequent care arrangement. Thus the program is special in the character of its caseload.

What Joseph Reid apparently had in mind was that foster family care could be expanded to a distressed population of children, in a form not radically different from the services being provided by other agencies but under better conditions made possible by the generous flow of charitable funds. This agency reflects a significant initiative from the private sector. Its staff tend to be paid at higher levels than those of other agencies offering similar services, and they have smaller case loads. As a consequence, there is less staff turnover, a widespread problem in the child welfare field. Another feature of the agency is that foster parents receive extra income in recognition of their special role.

Jim Casey approved of what he saw in the early beginnings of the Seattle program and after several years gave his support to the development of new divisions. From the time of the first children coming into care in 1966, the agency expanded at a steady rate. Table 1.1 shows the divisions of The Casey Family Program and the reported size of the caseload of each at the end of 1986, the time of the twentieth anniversary of the program.³ Some of the divisions shown in the table were only recently established so they had few or no children in

care. The table also contains the projected size of the caseload for each division. While the number of children in placement at any one time is relatively modest, the western program's current location in fifteen division sites situated in thirteen states gives it a significant national base.

The small size of each division's caseload reflects Jim Casey's desire that growth be limited at each site in the interest of the program's being able to deliver a more personalized service. According to the 1986 report, many of the divisions are not slated to go beyond 55 children as the normal caseload size, with only two (Seattle and South Dakota) serving as many as a hundred.⁴ In the interviews with former wards of the agency in the follow-up study described in this book, they often said that the agency took on the aura of extended family and that this was particularly meaningful when a foster family placement was interrupted and a new foster home had to be found. Such comments would have gladdened Jim Casey's heart because they confirmed his sense of what these children needed.

THE NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW SERVICE AGENCY

The Casey Family Program is an effort to utilize a well-known form of care, foster family home placement, in more creative ways for a challenging population of children. The emergence of such an agency also has special meaning now because residential institutional care for children showing behavioral difficulties is becoming prohibitively expensive and shrinking as a resource in many areas of the country. Indeed, some observers regard it as an "endangered species."⁵ There is hope that difficult children, such as those placed with this agency, can be cared for in family situations with good results at less cost.

This agency's emphasis on serving children with foster families until they reach young adulthood has taken place in a period in which those concerned with child welfare throughout the nation have regarded foster care with considerable ambivalence. The Maas and Engler study was followed by further intense national scrutiny of the foster care system. Reports by the Children's Defense Fund (1978) and the National Commission for Children in Need of Parents (1979) were typical of a number of reviews of foster care as a service for children that condemned in scathing terms the inability of foster care agencies to meet the needs of children for some degree of permanence in their living arrangements. Such criticisms reached a crescendo in the late

TABLE 1.1 The Divisions of The Casey Family Program
in Order of Founding: Social Work Staff, Children in Care 1986,
and Projected Caseloads

<i>Division</i>	<i>Social Workers</i>	<i>Children in Placement 12/31/86^a</i>	<i>Children in Placement at Full Development</i>
Seattle ^b	6	103	100
Yakima	3	52	55
Idaho	4	58	65
Montana	4	78	65
California	3	55	55
Oregon	4	54	65
South Dakota	6	52	100
North Dakota	5	42	80
Arizona	3	46	55
Hawaii	3	36	55
Austin	3	24	55
San Antonio	3	0	55
Louisiana	3	0	55
Wyoming	3	17	55
Oklahoma	3	0	55
	56	617	970

SOURCE: 1986 Annual Report (The Casey Family Program 20th Anniversary)

^a Includes 41 youths emancipated from care in student aid program and 2 in subsidized adoption.

^b The Seattle Division was called the Western Washington Division until 1985 when its name was changed.

1970's and helped to pass federal legislation bringing about a national policy change.

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272) has been described as one of the most important and far-reaching pieces of federal legislation in the area of child welfare to be enacted in recent history (Allen and Knitzer 1983). The legislation has established "permanency planning" as the major national orientation to children separated from their families. The Casey venture, whose foundation is the legitimacy of extended foster care for an especially vulnerable group of children, departs from this major orientation.

PROGRAM VARIATIONS IN TIME AND PLACE

The services offered the children by this program were not so rigidly standardized that all children were exposed to a fixed experience. With the passage of time, the points of view that guided the formation of the program changed as the board of trustees and staff became engaged with the realities of serving a group of challenging children. While the core formulations that Jim Casey enunciated were retained, these children were exposed to some variation in the service environment depending upon when and where they entered care. Some examples of changing perspectives and policies are the following:

1. There was less emphasis upon work with the children's families in the early years of the program since the plan was to accept children whose families were no longer a resource for them. With a growing awareness of the active involvement of a number of children with their families, the Western Washington Division (Seattle) had an advisory committee study the issue in 1977. Its report sought to correct what was regarded as an inadequate approach to work with families (The Casey Family Program 1977). A greater concern with the children's families seems to pervade the program now.
2. Although the term "delinquent children" (or those who were at risk of becoming delinquent) often appeared in the program's early descriptions of the types of children to be served, other types of children were admitted from the agency's start. For example, the agency accepted children with developmental disabilities in their backgrounds or those with a history of mental hospital care. Some of these admissions reflected dependency situations with special needs such as multiple sibling placements. The majority of children, however, coming into care were unsocialized youth who were in danger of becoming deviant as adults.
3. The agency has recently changed its policy toward subsidized adoption as a possibility for children who have become especially close to their foster families and now accepts it as a stated goal for some children in its care.
4. The divisions in which the children were placed varied from each other somewhat reflecting the local environments and the personal characteristics of the staff because a certain amount of local autonomy in shaping the service program was encouraged within the context of overall program policy. Jim Casey's experience in the United Parcel Service reinforced his view that some local initiative could bring out the best in a work force and thereby serve the organization's purposes. For example, there appears to have been variation among the divisions in the extent to which local mental health professionals were retained

to offer clinical treatment to children who required this as opposed to having agency social work staff carry major responsibility for this work. Depending upon the availability of regional institutional resources, there was also variation in the purchase of institutional and group care for children as interim placements for those who were not adapting well to foster family care, a strategy discussed in chapter 7.

5. The program modified its admission policies by choosing to accept children who were already successfully residing in a foster home placement not connected with the Casey Family Program and who were not problematic or delinquent. That is, the agency used its resources to make permanent a successful foster home placement. We call these arrangements "package placements" because the foster home came with the child. Of the 585 children, 23.1% (135) were in such placements. These children were on average less hostile and adapted better to foster care and were more likely to remain in the foster home until emancipation at age 18.

CENTRAL HYPOTHESIS: A CHAIN OF CONTINUITY IN LIFE COURSE

Children enter foster care at varying ages. Some come as infants while others are placed as teenagers. A child who is older is more likely to have experienced significant events, often traumatic, that have affected the child negatively. A central hypothesis underlying this study was that these events and the child's adaptation to them were likely to influence the way new placement arrangements were experienced. An agency dedicated to the caring for adolescents, such as this one, would tend to have many youngsters who had experienced prior placements with other agencies. Some of these placements may have been in group settings, and others may have been in foster family living arrangements where tolerance for the behavior of the children evaporated. A child who had been expelled from prior foster family placements would be expected to challenge the Casey program's arrangements. Our statistical analysis documented and elaborated this central hypothesis of continuity of life course experience.

A feature of our research was that we made an effort to determine important aspects of the pre-Casey life experiences of these children and to trace the course of their adjustments while in Casey care and afterward. We focused not only on the placements of the children in foster care but also on changes in living arrangements taking place outside agency systems, such as a child leaving his parents to live with his grandparents or to live with a father who had been separated from the mother.

There is little precedent for this kind of "tracking" of the child's living experiences in the research literature about foster care. The placement histories of children are rarely taken into account in looking at outcomes of subsequent agency efforts. An example of a presentation of such information that is useful for clinical purposes is Figure 1.1, which displays this aspect of the life of one child in the study. It reveals the turbulence of her history and some of the damage inflicted upon her.

The Case of Mary: A Fragmented Childhood

At the age of two, Mary and her only sibling had been abandoned by their mother and been left for a short while in the care of their father. When he could not cope, the children were sent to their grandparents, where they lived for two years. When the grandfather died, the grandmother had a nervous breakdown, and the children were then placed in a foster home.

At the time Mary was referred to the program at the age of twelve, she had already been exposed to a dozen living arrangements including two failed public agency efforts to provide her with adoptive placements. She had had a fragmented childhood saturated with rejection and neglect. The case reader documented that she had been scarred by her experiences and, out of mistrust for adults, had developed defenses that served her poorly. Foster parents who extended themselves to her were fended off and subjected to hair-raising episodes of nonconformity.

By the time Mary left the program at age sixteen, she had experienced eighteen living arrangements since her birth and had run away from her last three foster homes. The agency had no further resource for her and reluctantly returned custody to the family court and public social service department. The agency learned that by the time Mary was 21 she had already given birth to two children who were in informal foster boarding home placements and was expecting the birth of twins. None of the putative fathers were involved in helping her cope with her current circumstances.

Closed Case Study

The population of children reported on in this book are the 585 children who entered the Casey program and whose cases were closed on or before December 31, 1984. Six divisions of the program were in existence long enough to warrant inclusion in this study. These divi-

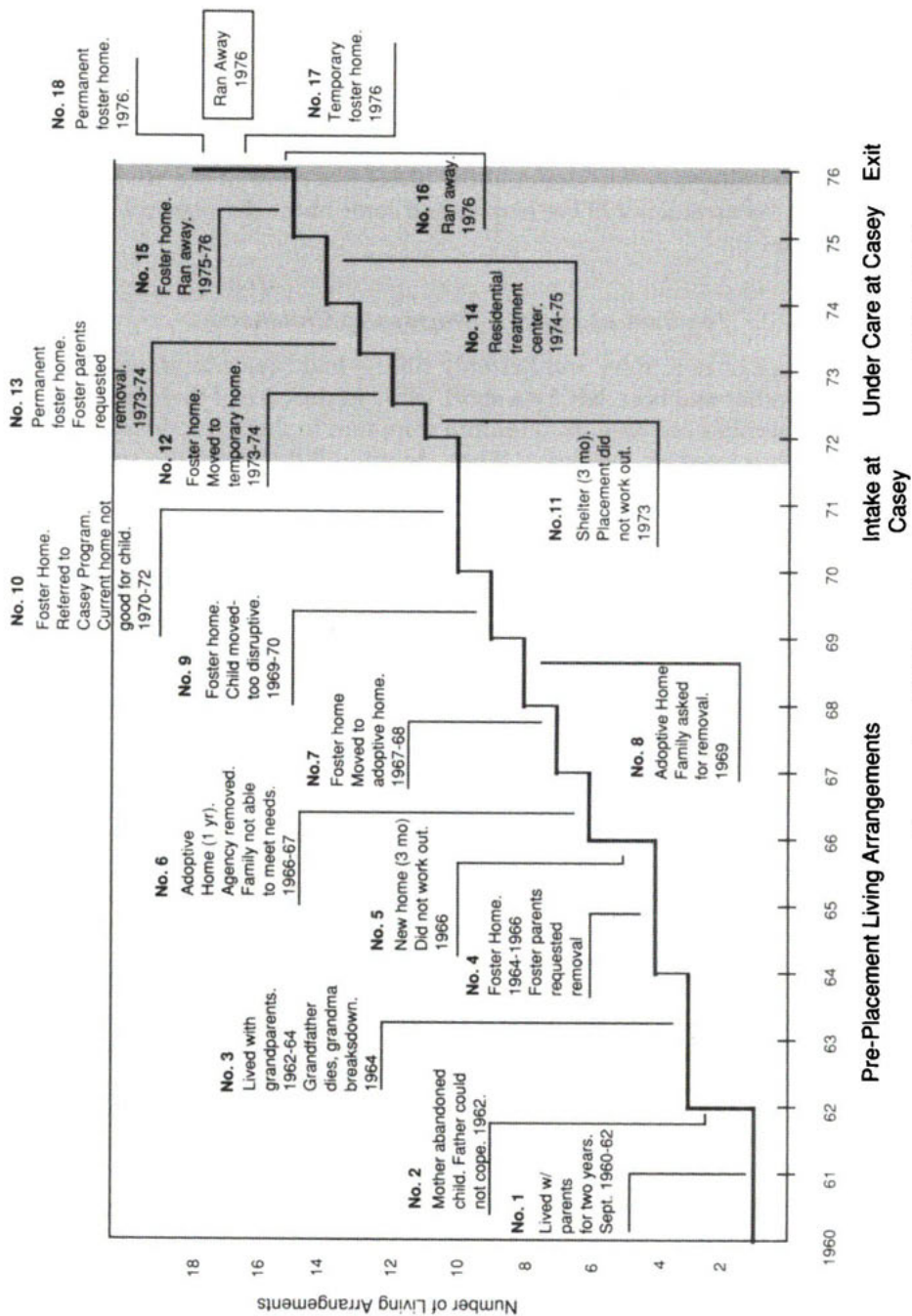


FIGURE 1.1. History of a Single Child's Living Arrangements, 1960-1976

sions and the years children began to enter their care were: Western Washington (1966), Yakima (1972), Idaho (1972), Montana (1973), California (1974), and Oregon (1977).

The major advantage of studying the closed cases was that the work could cover the program's history to date from "day one" and the task of reading and extracting information from case records could be done in a relatively brief period of time, one year, with little disruption of agency routines. The alternative was to undertake a prospective longitudinal study that would require many years of effort before yielding results. Our findings from this effort are contained in chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8.

We used a technique called "content analysis" to extract data systematically from written documents. Content analysis has been developed over several decades, and scholars continue to perfect it (Krippendorff 1980; Weber 1985). In chapter two, we describe our application of the procedures of content analysis so that our case readers could extract information objectively from the case records.

*Follow-Up Study of Subjects:
Test of the Validity of the Content Analysis*

Carrying out a content analysis of case records that were not prepared with any expectation that they would be input to a research study caused us to consider the implications of using these narrative records as if they were valid representations of the children's experiences in care. Fortunately, a substantive and objective test of the worth of the extracted data was made possible by the decision of the board of trustees to fund a follow-up investigation of a group of cases from the Seattle and Yakima Divisions. It included 106 subjects who were seen, on average, seven years after they had left the care of The Casey Family Program. The results of this effort are valuable in their own right and form an important part of our study. Coincidentally, the follow-up data permitted a test of the predictive validity of the measures derived from the content analysis of the case records. We were able to establish from the analyses of the follow-up data, discussed in chapter 6 and Chapter 9, that the data derived from the content analysis predicted variables observed at follow-up.

GENERALIZABILITY OF THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

As our readers review our findings and seek to place them in the context of previous research results about children in foster care, they

must remember that the extrapolation of findings about one population to a different one is always hazardous. Nevertheless, we feel that this agency's caseload is particularly worthy of research attention. The Casey program selected a majority of the children in this population because their families seemed unable or unwilling to provide adequate care and not likely to be a resource for their future care. These children and their families suffered more destructive experiences than one would typically find among the foster care children served by most public or private social agencies. Almost a quarter of this population were, however, package placements of relatively well-adjusted children.

The range of children, then, was approximately the same as the range in the typical foster care agency so that the applicability of the findings here is quite broad. Because the power of our statistical techniques is larger when the range of the population is larger, this population was in fact a very good choice for study. Our readers should still remember that we did not study a contrasting group of children placed in other settings so that our study does not have the advantage of comparisons with a control group. Nevertheless, we hypothesize that the general patterns of association that we have found would be replicated in studies of other agency populations serving a comparably large range of children. As in all empirical research, our study is a call to other researchers to confirm or challenge the associations we found.

Interpretation of the Results Reported

Many forces act to shape the way a child adjusts over time, and each can contribute a piece of explanation significant at different stages in the child's life. We seek to determine quantitatively the importance of such forces as a child's history of being abused, age at first separation from parents, and the number of placements experienced. We can use these variables as predictors of how children adjust while in care, their mode of departure from care, their condition at the point of departure, and how their lives are played out as adults. Some predictors overlap with each other in their ability to account for what happens to children, and others contribute uniquely to the explained variance. Much is left unexplained because human beings defy classification and follow idiosyncratic paths. Despite advances in the behavioral and social sciences, our measurement procedures were far from perfect. Given these conditions and the additional bounds resulting from the imperfections of our measurements, it is remarkable that

some significant explained variance is accounted for by the independent variables we used.

In the course of grappling with the data and the statistical analyses, our experience has been that the p-value reported with each statistical measure has been invaluable in weaving the findings into a more understandable picture. At the risk of burdening the reader with research detail, we have reported the p-value of each of our findings. Our experience has been that an association significant at the .001 level was usually undeniable empirically and obvious to us when we read the data file to verify the finding. These associations showed up consistently when we ran further analyses with more variables or on subsets of children. An association significant at the .01 level was almost always a stable finding. Occasionally, however, the finding did not appear consistently in further statistical analyses because it was obscured by the many other relations simultaneously influencing the association. When we report a finding significant at the .05 level, the finding is suggestive and worth noting, but it is wise to view such findings with the proverbial grain of salt. Subsequent analyses with more variables or with a restricted set of cases may not confirm the association's significance, suggesting that a more complex explanation may be required.

Those readers who are practitioners, policy makers, or child welfare advocates and who are caught up in powerful substantive issues in a dynamic field where controversy abounds might easily lose patience with what seems to be elaborate technical findings. Those most strongly involved in the issues discussed here sometimes say, "Don't bother to give me all that analytic stuff, just give me your findings. I'll take your word that you did your research piece correctly." This is a short-sighted approach because much of the support for foster care programs rests upon an uncertain base of evidence in which small pieces of explained variance become the empirical foundations of programs. The complexity and fragility of the evidence are no less a challenge to these readers than their efforts to explain why Johnnie who has had 15 placements before coming into his current service program is at extreme risk of not being helped to become stabilized. We hope that our readers accept our reporting of significance levels as our means of expressing the strength of our findings.

Concluding Note

We will document that these children often reflect in their life histories and in the problems shown in foster care the adversity that has

befallen their families. In chapter 10, we report their own statements about the care they received from The Casey Family Program and about their own present lives. Tracing the turbulent lives of the children as revealed in the case records and in the follow-up interviews with a subset of the subjects, we simultaneously felt empathy for the youngsters who suffered an intense sense of abandonment because their parents had totally disappeared from their lives and another kind of anguish for those who had not suffered parental loss but whose lives were intertwined with the most destructive kinds of parents. Finally, we present our conclusions in chapter 11.

CHAPTER TWO

Research Methods: An Overview

We discuss our methods in this chapter. Some sections are marked with an asterisk (*) to indicate that they are intended for readers with a methodologic interest and can be passed over by others.

This study is a retrospective longitudinal study. The longitudinal character of our research results from our decision to extract information reflecting stages in a child's life from archival data, the children's case records. Our study is not the prospective longitudinal study often reported in the child development literature with data gathered in real time.¹ The data extraction has taken place years after the events and phases in the child's life occurred.

Another caveat is that the data extracted from the closed case records are doubly derivative. Since the caseworker reported about the subject on many occasions in an unstructured manner, the worker's hindsight may have affected the contents of the record. Further, the case reader's knowledge of the progress of the whole case may have biased the evaluations of the condition of the child.

A second source of data is the subjects themselves in the follow-up study. We thus do not have repeated measures over time from the same source as one would collect in the classic longitudinal investigation. Needless to say, we would expect more accurate data in a study whose measures are taken prospectively and repeated in exactly the same way for each subject.

We do not refer to the limitations of our approach with a sense of apology. There are no reports of research on foster children now

available that cover large time spans such as we do in this book. The shortcut we have taken, not waiting twenty years or more to gather data prospectively, allows us to become engaged quickly with longitudinal-type data that offer considerable promise in the yield of results that can be extracted. With computerized tracking systems likely to be introduced into child welfare soon, we hope that future studies will reinvestigate these issues with designs overcoming the limitations here.

CASE READING INSTRUMENT FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS

The search for past information no longer directly available to observers is the *raison d'être* for content analysis. The case records have not been developed with the specific aim of supporting scientific research, and we knew that the agency divisions included in the study approached case recording tasks in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner, particularly early in their histories. Obviously, we had to be realistic in approaching information extraction tasks. After we balanced the imperfections inherent in data collected by a content analysis with what could be gained in the way of solid knowledge, we decided to take the greatest advantage that we could of the opportunities that were available.

The data on which this study is based derive from a content analysis involving the reading of case records by highly trained social workers who filled out a 72-page schedule that had been prepared for this purpose. A copy of the final version of this schedule is appendix A. The content of this instrument was based upon Fanshel's past experience in the conduct of research about foster children, foster families, and adopted children and from his knowledge of other studies. Many domains reflecting the complex phenomenology of foster care were included as shown by the variables listed in table 2.1.

Many ratings took the form of summated scales of the Likert-type (Selltiz, Wrightsman and Cook 1976:418-421). In such a scale, the reader specified the degree to which a condition held for the child being considered. For example, we asked the reader to provide a rating for each of sixteen items descriptive of the child's adaptation to care (e.g., expressed resistance to being in foster care). We gave the reader a series of ordered choices: "very much," "moderately," "a little," or "not at all" to indicate the degree to which the condition appeared in the description of the child's behavior in the case record. There were other questions that represented nominal scales such as the identification of the referral source of the case (self-referral, vol-

untary agency, family court, or other source). These scales were a fixed set of categories from which the case reader chose the most appropriate. We relied heavily upon fixed choice responses to questions because we wanted to minimize coding operations and to have the data in a state ready for computer entry and analysis.

Although the schedule is imposing in its appearance, most of the information extracted from the records was in precoded form so that some pages required only a check or two in appropriate boxes. Further, some sections did not apply to all children and could be omitted. Nevertheless, the data collection from the case records required a considerable effort that was quite expensive. More than three thousand hours were spent in extracting information from the records, an average of 4.7 hours per case.

In developing "closed ended" questions for the case reading schedule, we had to anticipate the major, theoretically relevant responses. To allow for answers that were not given in the list, the reader could choose the response "other" and specify in narrative form the special circumstances. In a number of important areas of the schedule, this spillover into the category "other" involved a substantial number of cases. When time permitted, an enlarged coding scheme was created, and the "other" responses were recoded. Where this was not possible, the narratives were entered into the computer.

Opportunities for more qualitative descriptions of the children were included in the content analysis operations. "Open-ended" questions did not have fixed choice responses and permitted the readers to answer in their own words. All such texts were entered into the computer, and they were useful in providing a sense of key issues in the care of the children.

We took the following actions to reduce the "static and noise" inherent in our content analysis and to enhance the rigor of the data collection:

1. Wherever possible, we asked for factual items in the case-reading schedule when there was a high probability that the information would be found in the case record. Examples of such items are: date of a child's birth, date of entry into care, child's school grade level at entry and at exit from Casey care, dates of interruptions of foster home placements while the child was in Casey care, the descriptions of the manner of a child's exit from care, indication that a psychiatric evaluation had been made of the child, and descriptions of purchase of special services for the child such as tutoring, specialized health care, and treatment for behavioral problems.
2. In developing items for the case readers to rate the quality of children's

adaptation and behavior while in care, we attempted to use descriptors of the children that summarized overall qualities in a grosser form rather than resort to subtle, intrapsychic phenomena unavailable except through direct observation of a child. We asked the case reader to make summary ratings of the total "aura" or "gestalt" that permeated narrative descriptions in a case record (e.g., ratings of the child's overall adjustment, level of performance in school, and challenge to caretakers).

3. Our reliability check of the data took the form of an independent reading of 53 cases by second readers who also filled out schedules. We used the intraclass correlation coefficient (Fisher 1970) of the two ratings to report the repeatability of our measures. This statistic is an estimate of the fraction of variance that would be explained if the readers' ratings were regressed on the "true" value.
4. We examined the construct validity of our measures by the consistency of the observed relationships with theory. For example, we would expect that children who suffered physical abuse before coming into care or who experienced a great many failed living arrangements would show evidence of maladaptive behavior when described in their Casey intake studies and would likely suffer more interruptions in their placements with foster families than children who had fewer interruptions.
5. Training of the case readers and continuous quality control checking of the completed schedules standardized the research procedures and the performances of the case readers.

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES

It was important that the case readers be professionally trained, seasoned in work related to families and children, and amenable to the requirements of the research assignment. We recruited four doctoral students with practice backgrounds in clinical work at the Columbia University School of Social Work. When one reader resigned, we hired a replacement who had substantial child welfare experience.²

The readers were oriented to the case-reading schedule in several training sessions. The schedule was tested in draft form by having the four readers independently read a single case and fill out the schedule. There was full discussion of ambiguities in defining terms. This review procedure was repeated on several cases with two or three readers carrying out the reading task and led to reframing of some items and clarification of the intent of the rating scales.

The reading of the 585 case records took place between August 1984 and June 1985. From 40 to 80 records were read each month during the heart of the study. When interpretation of items required

further definition, these were discussed with either Fanshel or Grundy. One of the readers was given supervisory responsibilities and reviewed completed schedules with the other readers routinely. These reviews were more intensive in the early part of the study. In the course of preparing the data on the schedules for entry into a computer file, a research assistant and Grundy identified inconsistencies. These were discussed with the readers to ensure common understanding of procedures. Because we intended to have about fifty randomly selected cases reread to estimate reliability, we discouraged the discussion of specific cases. There was exchange about professional practice issues revealed in the case records, and the case readers shared their reactions with us. Although reading the records and filling out the schedules was a difficult assignment, the readers appeared highly motivated and expressed satisfaction in participating in an effort that might be helpful in serving deprived children.

MEASUREMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTENT ANALYSIS

Our research experience with foster care phenomena has led us to distinguish between two types of variables: status variables and ratings. A status variable is a variable indicating whether a relatively objective condition holds or does not hold for a child. Examples are whether the child experienced a disrupted adoption in his past, whether the child ever served in an institution for youthful offenders, and whether a child was emancipated from Casey care, discharged to parents or returned to the court. Such information tends to be factual and less prone to the problems of subjectivity introduced by the source of the information or the data collection procedure. The most common measurement problem for a status variable is missing data.

Ratings carry a great deal of weight in our study because the case reader is asked to record summary impressions obtained from the social worker's case records about important domains in a standardized form. These impressions are the data that were the basis of the study and are summary clinical evaluations of issues such as the child's adaptation to being in care, the degree to which the child was described as resistant to being in foster care, and the degree of challenge posed by the child to those taking care of him.

Overall, our experience in the content analysis effort was that the preplacement histories of the children and how they appeared at the time of the Casey intake study were described in more condensed and abstract narrative fashion in the case records than was true for the period reflecting the child's experience while in care. The case readers