



## **An Exploratory Investigation Of Foster Parent Retention In Arkansas**

**By: Leah Hamilton**

### **Abstract**

While widely regarded as problematic among child welfare professionals, the issue of foster parent retention has received limited academic attention. Even less is known about the state of foster parenting in Arkansas. In this exploratory study, the author conducted qualitative interviews with five child welfare workers to determine whether Arkansas experiences the same difficulty retaining foster parents as other states. The study also sought to explore the respondent's perceived barriers to retention. It was discovered that Arkansas experiences severe foster parent attrition due to emotional drain, institutional barriers, lack of agency support, and overcrowding of homes.

**Hamilton, L.** (2011). "An Exploratory Investigation of Foster Parent Retention in Arkansas." *Midsouth Political Science Review*, Volume 12, 2011, pages 69-85. Published by University of Central Arkansas, version of record available at: <http://uca.edu/politicalscience/midsouth-political-science-review-mpsrr/volume-12-2011/>

# An Exploratory Investigation of Foster Parent Retention in Arkansas

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*While widely regarded as problematic among child welfare professionals, the issue of foster parent retention has received limited academic attention. Even less is known about the state of foster parenting in Arkansas. In this exploratory study, the author conducted qualitative interviews with five child welfare workers to determine whether Arkansas experiences the same difficulty retaining foster parents as other states. The study also sought to explore the respondent's perceived barriers to retention. It was discovered that Arkansas experiences severe foster parent attrition due to emotional drain, institutional barriers, lack of agency support, and overcrowding of homes.*

## Introduction

In 2005, Michael and Sharon Gravelle of Ohio made national headlines when it was discovered that eight of their eleven adopted (from foster care) children were forced to sleep in cages at night (AP, 2005a). "Some of the cages were rigged with alarms ... and one had a dresser in front of it. One boy said he'd slept in the cage for three years" (AP, 2005b). All eleven children were removed from the Gravelle's custody and the couple was subsequently charged with abuse. Shocking stories of abuse in foster homes are all too common. Citizens become incensed and new legislation is passed to keep "abusive" foster parents out of the system. The complex circumstances behind these tragic situations, however, receive little attention.

The Gravelles cared for "difficult to place" children. In child welfare lingo, "difficult to place" means nearly impossible to care for. For example, the Gravelles were caring for children with autism, pyromania, fetal alcohol syndrome, violent behaviors (AP, 2005b), and a disorder inducing children to eat "non-food items" compulsively, known professionally as Pica (AP, 2006). Receiving little help from child welfare services as foster parents and absolutely no help after adoption the Gravelles, and many others in their situation, believe they made the best choice available to them. Other foster

parents caring for difficult children and receiving negligible support from the system choose to leave foster parenting altogether. A survey by the US Department of Health and Human Services found that 36.3 percent of foster parents planning to quit fostering cited a lack of agency support. Approximately forty percent (40.5) of former foster parents made the same complaint while another 36 percent cited the children's behavior as their main reason for discontinuing care (USDHHS, 1993).

The National Conference of State Legislators released a report in 2002 stating that low retention of quality foster parents is causing a crisis in the child welfare system (Christian, 2002). While the number of children placed in foster care between 1984 and 1995 rose 68 percent, the number of available foster parents actually decreased four percent. High turnover (between thirty and fifty percent per year) is the main cause of this decrease. Experts state that "this trend increases the risk that children will be inappropriately placed in expensive institutions or with families that are unprepared to meet their complex needs" (Christian, 2002, p. 1). This increase in the number of foster children is attributed to a confluence of factors, including a heightened societal focus on child abuse, mandatory reporting laws, passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974). Further, a decrease in social programs left more families at risk for poverty, homelessness and substance abuse (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001).

Since 1995, national foster care rolls have declined from 510,699 children in 1995 to 463,333 children in out of home care in 2008 (ACF, 2009). Conversely, the number of children in foster care in Arkansas has steadily increased over the past decade (from 5,486 in 2000 to 7,491 in 2010), while the number of available foster homes has stagnated (ARDHHS, 2000; ARDHHS, 2010b). The following will explore the importance of foster parent retention and current efforts to stem attrition. Finally, I review the limited information available regarding the experiences of Arkansas foster children and their caregivers, illustrating the need for further investigation. In this study, I will attempt to address three questions. 1) Do DHS workers in Arkansas report facing difficulties in retaining quality foster parents? 2) If so, what are some of the primary reasons? 3) What steps has the department taken to improve foster parent retention?

## **Literature Review**

If qualified foster parent turnover is as high as fifty percent per year (Christian, 2002), then we can assume that the remaining pool of foster

parents is largely inexperienced and less prepared to address the specialized needs of children in care (Fernandez, 2009). A growing body of research indicates that foster parent retention has a significant impact on the quality of care for foster children. Children who relocate foster care homes multiple times exhibit more emotional and behavioral problems (Fernandez, 2009). Ironically, these problems often lead to placement disruption and subsequent moves, compounding the sense of loss and anxiety (Van der Horst, LeRoy, & Van der Veer, 2008).

Some studies have discovered a link between multiple foster placements and poor adjustment, even after adoption (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan and Localio, 2007). One such study found that the strongest predictors of behavior problems among adopted children are sexual abuse, neglect and multiple foster placements (Simmel, 2007). When finally achieving placement stability with quality care, improvements are often seen in emotional and behavioral problems and school performance (Fernandez, 2009).

A qualitative study in Australia explored the important role that skilled foster parents play in the complex process of helping foster children heal from trauma (Riggs, Augoustinos, & Delfabbro, 2009). It was found that inclusion in family rituals, culture and identity had the potential to undo some of the damage created by child abuse and neglect. Other research has discovered that children diagnosed with attachment disorders can make improvements when placed with caring foster parents (Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates, 2001). Similarly, children placed in foster care are more likely to build positive relationships than children housed in a residential treatment facility (Wise & Egger, 2009).

While placement instability cannot be attributed to one single factor, foster parent turnover plays a significant role. Approximately 50 percent of foster parent trainees abandon their role before a child is placed in their home. Of those remaining, 22 percent plan to resign and twelve percent are uncertain whether they wish to proceed after six months of care giving. Foster parents often report difficult child behaviors, lack of access to or communication with caseworkers, inadequate agency support (including respite care, mentorship, transportation and health care), and feeling as though they have no say in decisions about a child's future as the primary reasons for attrition (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999).

A national survey found that the top five reasons cited (Christian, 2002) by foster parents *intending* to resign their role include not having a say in the child's case plan, emotional difficulty seeing a child leave, lack of agency support, the need to return to work outside the home, and lack of child care. Similarly (Christian, 2002), the top five reasons cited by *former* foster parents for resigning include a lack of agency support, poor caseworker communication, problems with foster child behavior, adoption, and not having a voice in the child's future.

While limited, the available empirical evidence also points to the importance of increased supports in improving foster parent satisfaction and retention. Chamberlain, Moreland and Reid (1992), for example, monitored the effect of a \$70 per month increase in foster care payments on foster care parent retention rates. Findings demonstrate that foster parents who received increased stipends had an attrition rate that was two-thirds less than a control group. Interestingly, the investigation also indicated a positive change (an increased retention rate) among the control group. Qualitative data from interviews revealed that all foster parents, in both the treatment and control groups, expressed appreciation for being involved in the study and felt that they had participated in something significant. Chamberlain et al. (1992) hypothesized that beyond an increased stipend, foster parents experienced improved satisfaction simply by feeling that their voices were perceived as important and that they were being heard.

Another study investigated a controversial new approach to out of home placement known as 'professional foster parenting' (Christian, 2002). Professional foster parents are provided an annual salary, in lieu of a small reimbursement rate for only the time a child is in foster care placement. In other words, professional foster parents are paid as full time employees of the agency. Proponents of the approach argue that it allows room for foster parents that might otherwise not be able to afford the time away from a full time job. This approach emphasizes the important role of foster parents in the child welfare process. Findings may support this strategy as a Florida pilot program that paid foster parents an annual salary produced a 95 percent foster home retention rate (Christian, 2002). Opponents fear that professionalized foster care might attract financially motivated candidates instead of foster parents who care about the welfare of children.

Testa and Rolock (1999) compared two types of foster care. In one program foster parents received an annual salary of approximately \$16,000 in addition to a \$600 per month per child reimbursement rate. Foster parents

in a second group received a tax-free housing subsidy, plus monthly board payments. The professional foster care program was found to increase long-term placement stability (children living in only one foster home) to a greater degree than the housing subsidy programs. Testa and Rolock (1999) hypothesized that increased foster placement retention might be explained by an increased dedication to foster parenting by those receiving subsidies. Another study (Brown and Calder, 2000) employed phone surveys with 274 foster parents in Alberta, Canada. Participants were asked, "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" Two of the most common themes were "good relationships with social workers" and "adequate payment for services."

Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) mailed surveys to 539 foster parents in Ohio. It was discovered that good training and positive relationships with social workers were critical to foster parent retention. Rodger, Cummings and Leschied (2006) built upon the work of Denby et.al (1999) and mailed a similar survey to 652 foster parents in Ontario, Canada. Findings were consistent with the original study, indicating that foster parents who report positive relationships with caseworkers are less likely to consider quitting.

Several states have begun new policy initiatives to better address the needs of foster parents. For example, many care givers complain that they are granted few rights in the child welfare process, such as the 46.3 percent of foster parents with "no say in the child's future," discussed above. As a result, sixteen states (AL, AR, CA, GA, IL, KY, LA, MD, MO, MS, NM, OK, OR, PA, TN and WA) have enacted a "Bill of Rights" for foster parents "including the right to be treated with respect and the right to voice grievances without fear of retaliation or harassment" (Christian, 2002; NFPA, 2011). In addition, these bills give foster parents the right to be treated with respect and as an "integral member of the professional team," ("Foster Parent Support Act," 2007).

In 2002, Casey Family Programs partnered with 26 public child welfare agencies around the country to create a collaborative approach to recruiting and retaining foster families. Together, Casey and the various agencies created a discussion about the needs of foster parents and shared effective strategies. Team members discovered three broad issues affecting foster parent retention, including "lack of support and responsiveness from the child welfare agency," "lack of clarity around role and inclusion of resource

families" and "lack of effective partnership between resource families and birth families" (Lutz & Agosti, 2005).

To increase agency support and responsiveness, Casey set out three specific strategies. These included "providing resource families with necessary information about the child and family," "ensuring that responses to resource family issues and concerns are timely and supportive," and "ensuring regular and frequent visitation of children in placement by the workers" (Lutz & Agosti, 2005, p. 39). More specifically, some agencies implemented these goals by creating a child information form, communicating more via email, conducting follow up calls shortly after child placement or inviting foster families to attend case planning meetings. These general strategies created an increase in foster parent satisfaction by 94 percent in Denver, Colorado, 47 percent in San Mateo, California, 33 percent in Cuyahoga, Ohio and 33 percent in New Mexico.

Strategies to improve foster parent role clarity included "training staff on facilitation of difficult relationships," "raising awareness about the need for birth family-resource family connections," and "increasing understanding of confidentiality issues" (Lutz & Agosti, 2005, p. 43). Some states, for example, created new conflict resolution trainings for staff and initiated more meetings between foster and biological parents. Improvements in foster parent involvement were seen, including a 66 percent increase in Utah, fifty percent in Oklahoma, and 45 percent in Vermont.

Casey's third goal to improve foster parent retention (improved foster-birth family relationships) included the strategies of "connecting resource families and birth families shortly after placement" and "supporting birth families in the relationship with resource families" (Lutz & Agosti, 2005, p. 47). States pursuing this goal created child information meetings, in which birth families taught foster families about a child's needs, preferences, et cetera. The observed result was an improved feeling of empowerment among both foster and birth families.

### **Foster Care in Arkansas**

In 2010, 7,491 children lived in Arkansas foster homes. Roughly 20 percent of these children had been in care for more than two years and 12 percent had been in care for more than three (ARDHHS, 2010a). Of the 4,113 Arkansas children who entered care in 2010, more than ninety percent had been removed due to neglect in the biological home. Among children in care

in 2010, roughly one quarter had been in three to nine placements and an additional seven percent had experienced ten or more placements (ARDHHS, 2010b). Of the 165 allegations of abuse in Arkansas foster homes in 2010, 27 were found to be true (ARDHHS, 2010b).

In 2002, the Federal Administration for Children and Families conducted its first Child and Family Service Review in the State of Arkansas (Unknown, 2002). The report found that, among other goals, the state of Arkansas needed to improve recruitment and retention of foster families serving minority and disabled children. Since that time, the State of Arkansas has established a foster parent retention and recruitment work group (Unknown, 2008). In 2010, 458 new foster homes were recruited, contributing to the 1,150 total licensed homes in June, 2010 (ARDHHS, 2010a). This number represents a slight increase from the 993 home licensed in June, 2002 (ARDHHS, 2002).

## **Methods**

Still, a large scale database of foster parents, including turnover rates and reasons for attrition is unavailable (Unknown, 2008). For this reason, it was necessary to engage in a small scale exploratory study. Previous foster care research has found this model useful. For example, Greeson and Bowen (2008) interviewed seven foster youth to explore the role of mentoring for emancipating teens. Another study (N=10) explored foster parent knowledge of child development and trauma in Australia (Osmond, Scott & Clark, 2008).

Employing a purposive sampling technique (Berg, 2008), Arkansas child welfare workers were chosen for this preliminary investigation as they would be in the best position to observe trends in foster parenting. I contacted Arkansas State Department of Human Services administrators, who connected me with five workers, able and willing to speak with me. The administrators I spoke with expressed that improved foster parent retention was of high importance to them as well and hoped that my research might shed some light on the issue. I conducted interviews in their offices during the months of November, 2008 and August, 2009.

Three of the workers described themselves as "Foster Care Workers," responsible for ongoing case management once a child is placed in foster care. Another identified as a "Family Service Worker," responsible for recruiting and licensing new homes. The final respondent had recently been



promoted to the role of state Director of Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention. The workers reported between one and eight years of experience at the department, with an average of 4.25 years. I spoke with one male and four females.

All study participants were provided a pseudonym and promised confidentiality. In audiotaped, semi-structured interviews, workers were asked about their experiences with foster parents, their views on foster parents attrition and state efforts to improve retention. See Appendix A for the full interview guide. Interviews lasted from 10 to 20 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

I coded first for a priori or focused codes (Charmaz, 2006) informed by the literature on retention such as "lack of caseworker support," "child's behavior," et cetera. This method was chosen to triangulate the findings of a small sample (Berg, 2008). In addition, I applied grounded theory techniques such as emergent themes and in vivo coding (Charmaz, 2006). To further coding reliability, a professor of sociology at the University of Arkansas also reviewed the interviews. She and I engaged in peer debriefing to discuss emergent themes and implications. After completing a summary of my findings, I emailed a draft of this report to interview respondents and Department of Human Services administrators for member review (Berg, 2008). The feedback I received indicated that my findings were consistent with their views and that the recommendations might prove useful.

## Findings

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that Arkansas foster parents are leaving the system for many of the same reasons discussed in previous research, including the child's behaviors, lack of agency support and poor communication with caseworkers. These workers, however, reported a few issues not discussed in the literature, and I will detail them below. When asked about their opinions of foster parents, worker responses usually fell under two general categories; the emotional burden placed upon foster parents and institutional barriers.

The emotional burden (or drain) of caring for foster children was mentioned often in these interviews. Two workers specifically used the term, "burnout" when discussing foster parents experiences. "A lot of them just get burned out .....we just keep stuffing kids in, so I don't think they get a break, and they probably need it." Emotional burnout can come from a variety of

sources. One mentioned in previous research is the difficulty of seeing a child leave the foster home. Case workers reported that foster parents can become quickly attached to foster children and experience emotional drain upon separation. Also mentioned several times was the emotional drain of a foster child's behaviors. One worker explained, "These kids are abused. So, they're going to have problems." Foster parents may not be properly prepared for the level of difficulty involved with caring for victims of trauma and abuse.

As discussed in previous literature, several institutional barriers exist to improving foster parent retention. One worker stated, "A lot of foster parents get really frustrated with us, you know, the system." A common response in these interviews, mentioned nine times, was that foster parents often felt they had insufficient communication with their case workers. One respondent believed the major reason for foster parent attrition to be, "workers not returning their phone calls. That'd be the number one complaint among foster parents." Foster parents require regular contact with their worker to answer questions pertaining to resources, caring for the child or "sometimes they just need to vent."

It does not appear that communication issues can be contributed to unprofessional or undedicated caseworkers. Rather, it is assumed that low foster parent-worker communication has a strong correlation with high case loads among workers. Each respondent mentioned the high burden facing agency employees. Respondents each had a caseload of 23 to 25 children, while the State of Arkansas recommended maximum is fifteen. One respondent felt that poor foster parent retention was greatly affected by a "lack of workers."

A lack of agency support is another similar finding this research shares with its predecessors. Mentioned eleven times in these interviews, agency support encompasses a variety of needs, such as help with clothing or counseling services for foster children. Another common complaint is the extremely low reimbursement rates received by Arkansas foster parents. Except in extreme circumstances, foster parents receive between \$400 and \$475, per child, per month. One worker reported that this rate had not been changed in the past fifteen years.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, in 2007, even families in the poorest tax bracket needed to spend a minimum of \$650 per month, per child for basic maintenance (food, transportation, clothing, child

care) (Lino, 2008). One respondent explained that parents often dip into their own pockets to cover this gap. "A lot of people [foster parents] spend a lot more money on our kids than they actually get."

A barrier to retention in Arkansas not mentioned in previous research is the high degree of institutional requirements placed on foster parents. Mentioned five times in these interviews, workers felt that foster parents may become quickly overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork and other requirements. One respondent stated, "There's so many rules, there's things you can and can't do. You know, they might get in trouble for things. So, I think they get really frustrated." Another explained,

"It's difficult to get things done when it comes to working with the state. I think a lot of it, we have specific rules and things have to be done within this law and this law, and you need this paperwork and this paperwork, and it's frustrating to them because they're trying to get everything done that needs to be done, and it's harder than just having a typical child of your own. And that's pretty complicated."

Further, workers expressed that the burden placed upon foster parents was becoming ever greater. "We just keep asking more and more of the foster parents and not giving them any extra help with it."

Another issue unique to this study was a feeling that overcrowded homes led to foster parent burnout. Depending on the square footage of the home, foster parents can serve up to five foster children at a time. However, if the family has their own biological children, there can be no more than eight children living in the home, total. For example, if a foster family has four biological children, they can care for no more than four foster children, regardless of the size of the home.

Respondents expressed that a lack of foster parents in the state led to maximizing the number of children in homes and foster parents being asked to care for children they had not originally intended. While new foster parents are always asked what type of child they would prefer to care for (age, gender, et cetera), the lack of foster parents often means that foster parents are asked to care for "kids that they're not necessarily equipped for." One respondent stated that, "They're really dedicated people, and if we beg them, they will take them [difficult children]."

While most of the respondents were unaware of new efforts at foster parent retention, the Director of Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention stated that the department was seeking to better support foster parents by engaging community partners. Churches and civic groups were recruited around the state to create a volunteer support network for foster parents. For example, some churches were supplying food, school supplies and respite care to foster families in their community. She also reported that foster parent reimbursement rates had recently been increased "a little bit."

An overwhelming theme of this research is that parents often come into the system unprepared for the difficulty of caring for foster children and without a thorough understanding of the child welfare system. Workers often blamed this gap on poor training. One respondent stated, "I think it would be helpful for them to know exactly what they're getting into." Another said, "Sometimes I think the training paints a picture that's not necessarily accurate.... Maybe they have false expectations." Once licensed, there also seems to be lack of support structure, as foster parents navigate their roles. One respondent believed, "We need more support programs for especially our newer ones [foster parents] because they don't have a clue, and then they don't know where to go for services a lot of times."

Finally, one worker poignantly explained that while Arkansas is blessed with many excellent foster parents, there is not enough training and support services to cultivate potential in others. "I don't think we've had problems retaining good foster parents. Maybe we have problems retaining foster parents that could become good foster parents. The really good ones, I think, hang in there." Without an improved support structure, Arkansas may continue to see the attrition of an important resource.

## **Discussion**

Among this study's considerable limitation are its small size and sampling method. Interviewing five human service workers (four of whom worked in the same region of the state) greatly limits the generalizability of the findings. However, given the lack of attention to foster care in Arkansas (outside of Human Service Department data and a handful of newspaper articles) it was critical to begin this investigation in an exploratory manner. Future research with an expanded sample size and incorporating the perspectives of foster parents themselves is greatly needed. Still, the findings presented here lay an important foundation for further investigation.

In 2008, four children died while in Arkansas foster homes and a single foster father was arrested for sexually assaulting children in his care (Blomeley, 2008). Two of the deceased children are believed to be the victims of abuse. These tragic circumstances have created, however, a renewed attention in Arkansas on the health of the foster care system. Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe said in September, 2008 that "fixing the state's foster-care system is absolutely the number one focus of his administration" (Blomeley, 2008). Rarely are child welfare advocates blessed with such rapt attention to their cause by the public and political leaders.

Kingdon (1995) describes such a circumstance as a "policy window." Negative media events often create opportunities for policy advocates to propose solutions to "newly" discovered problems. Governor Beebe and Arkansas legislators are currently looking for new ways to improve the foster care system and prevent any further abuse or media scrutiny. In addition, Arkansas State Human Services administrators, receiving the brunt of suspicion and scrutiny, are now more open to policy changes than at any other time.

In his recent discussion of the Arkansas foster care system, Governor Beebe told state legislators that human services budgets had been cut at the federal level and were making an already difficult job nearly impossible (Blomeley, 2008). Staff cutbacks have increased casework loads to approximately double the recommended amount. Any changes to improve foster parent retention will have to come at minimal financial cost. Similarly, because case loads are so high, with an average of 28 children per worker (Blomeley, 2008), changes will not be successful if they require a great amount of additional staff effort. The most successful strategies will be those that ease the current burden on caseworkers.

For these reasons, it may not be practical for Arkansas to implement many of the strategies explored by other states at this time. Programs such as the professionalized foster care system, which is showing promise in Florida, are not currently feasible in Arkansas due to the increased cost. Further, increased training requirements, as recommended by Casey Family Programs would only put further strain on worker time. There may be a time in the future when Arkansas' Human Services has greater resources and it would be appropriate to begin exploring such options. Until that time, effective policy strategists would seek solutions with minimal cost and time requirements.

Mentoring programs, for example, would most likely be highly effective in Arkansas. If foster parents were able to use each other as resources, they would be better able to deal with difficult child behaviors. They would feel more supported within the system and would require less of their caseworker's time. For those times when caseworker input is required, an increased use of email communication (where available) could improve response time. Finally, to give foster parents a greater sense of voice in the child welfare process, it would be relatively easy to encourage foster parent involvement at all case planning meetings. Case workers spend much of their time in court, meeting with biological parents, or in administrative case reviews. Very few of these proceedings need exclude foster parents, either by regulation or legislation.

Arkansas finds itself in the precarious position of needing to improve services, on an already inadequate budget. Solutions with minimal cost and those that have the added benefit of reducing worker load will be the best received, the most practical and the most effective. The findings of this study suggest that Arkansas might benefit from a foster parent mentoring program, increased use of email and foster parent involvement in case planning activities. In the long run, it is recommended that Arkansas increase human services budgets and decrease worker caseloads to begin exploring some of the broader strategies discussed here.

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### Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. How long have you worked for the Department of Human Services?
2. How long have you worked with foster parents?
3. In what capacity do you work with foster parents?
4. Have you witnessed difficulties in retaining foster parents?
5. In your experience, why do you foster parents leave?
6. What things do you believe need to change to improve foster parent retention?
7. Do you know of any initiatives in Arkansas to improve foster parent retention?