

Tracking child welfare placement outcomes at BYFC and across Québec

Tonino Esposito, Jaime Wegner-Lohin, Nico Trocmé, Susan Gallo

Building on the service outcome indicators developed at Batshaw Youth and Family Centres (BYFC) for the Evidence Based Management initiative (see ITK volume 1, issues 1 and 2), the McGill Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF), in collaboration with the Association des Centres Jeunesse du Québec (ACJQ) and the 16 Youth Centres across Québec¹ have been tracking and analyzing six service outcome indicators. This article provides a review alongside an update on the **three placement indicators** that were initially presented in ITK volume 2, issues 3, 4 and 5— by including an additional year of data, as well as comparisons with provincial averages². The three placement indicators are: 1. Out-of-home placement, 2. Placement stability and 3. Permanence.

Out-of-home Placement

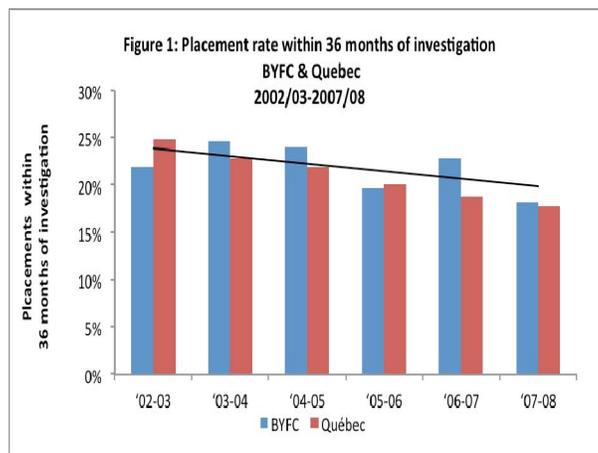
The out-of-home placement measure describes the *placement experience of children from the point of first contact at Evaluation, and looks at any out-of-home placement lasting longer than 72 hours occurring within 36 months of the initial retained report*. In other words, this indicator measures the likelihood that a child who is investigated following a retained report will experience a formal placement within three years. These types of placements consist of: a) kinship foster care b) traditional foster care c) group home placement and d) readaptation centre placement.

To avoid double counting children entering out-of-home placement, children who had involvement with BYFC within the previous 12 months were excluded from the indicator. Youth who were older than 14 years of age at the time of their initial report were also excluded as they would be older than 18 within the three year follow-up and would have aged out of Youth Protection Services. Given the relatively large proportion of youth in this category, future analyses needs to be conducted to examine the placement trajectories of youth aged 15 and older.

In order to track these cases, a list was compiled of 99,278 children across Québec whose initial report was investigated from 2002-03 to 2007-08. Of the 99,278 children, 5,257 were children receiving services from BYFC. All 99,278 children were then monitored over 36 months for any placement experience lasting longer than

72 hours³. For example, the children identified in 2007 – 2008 were followed until 2010 – 2011.

Figure 1 shows a downward trend in placement rates for both BYFC and Québec between 2002/03 and 2007/08. The majority of children investigated **do not** experience



an out-of-home placement within the three year follow-up period; 78% at BYFC and 79% provincially. The proportion of children who are placed in out-of-home care varies by Youth Centre, with the lowest being at 16.3% and the highest at 28.2%. In 2002/03, BYFC placement rates were lower than the provincial average, but they varied over the years and in 2007/08 the rate was similar to that of the province. Overall, BYFC shows a similar placement rate to the provincial average, with 22% of children who are evaluated being subsequently placed in out-of-home care within three years of the initial evaluation, compared to 21% across Québec.

Jurisdictional context can explain much of the variation in placement rates across Québec. It is important to consider the availability of resources in the community and the socioeconomic status of the families served by each Youth Centre when evaluating differences in placement rates. An analysis by Esposito (2012) on the provincial data shows that 49% of the variation in the overall placement rate by child protection jurisdiction is explained by the variation in socioeconomic disadvantages of the population served within each jurisdiction. Further, it is also important to note that informal placements and entrustments with family members are not included in the placement counts, which could account for some of

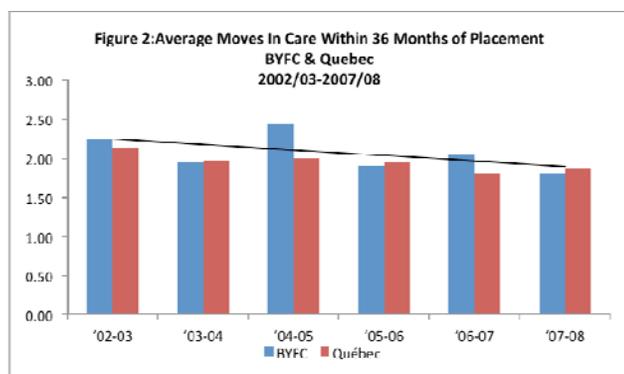
the decline in placement rates. Importantly, in July 2007 the Youth Protection Act in Québec implemented significant changes that could have impacted on the placement rates in subsequent years. Additional research is needed on both of these aspects in order to verify the downward trend in placement rates and to better understand the possible causes.

Placement Stability

Placement stability is essential for children to develop secure attachments and a sense of belonging and identity as they cope with separation from their families. Some placement changes can be beneficial (e.g., poor match between child and foster parents), other placement changes reflect agency mandates, such as moving children to less restrictive settings. However, multiple placements in out-of-home care are associated with both immediate and long-term negative outcomes for children, including behavioral and emotional difficulties.

In this indicator, *placement change is defined as any new placement, lasting longer than 72 hours that occurred within 36 months of a first placement*⁴. All changes are counted with the exception of complementary placements (ie. sleep away, summer camp, respite care, hospitalization), family reunification and entrustments; however, subsequent returns to out-of-home care following reunification are counted. To date, the placement changes over 36 months have been monitored for 34,339 children in Québec entering out-of-home care between April 2002 and March 2008. Of these children, 1,909 were served by BYFC.

As shown in **Figure 2** over the six year period, children placed at BYFC experience an average of 2 moves in care over 36 months, similar to the provincial average of 1.96. Both BYFC and the rest of the province show a decrease in the average number of moves in care. The average number of moves at BYFC ranges from a high of 2.4 in 2004 to a low of 1.8 in 2007. Across the province, the average number of placement changes range from a low of 1.5 to a high of 2.3.



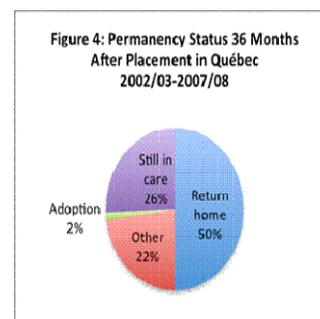
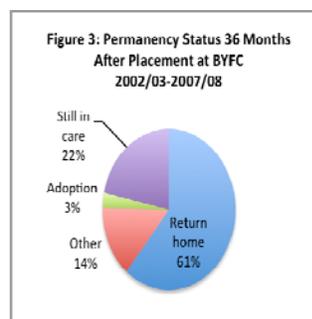
Overall, BYFC shows a higher average number of moves than provincially in earlier years, but is now below the provincial average.

Despite a decline in the average number of placement changes, the majority of children placed in care experience at least one move. At BYFC, an average of 21% of children experience 4 or more placements, compared to the provincial average of 18.5%. Further analysis is needed to determine which factors may contribute to an increased likelihood of placement change. Some factors that would be interesting to consider are:

- Whether socio-economic factors play a role;
- Whether changes to the YPA in 2007, mentioned earlier, have an impact on placement change rates;
- The reasons for referral;
- The sources of referral and how it impacts decision-making;
- The co-existing parental difficulties and whether there are specific difficulties that lend themselves to a higher likelihood that the clinical practice includes longer placements.

Permanence

The *permanency status measure counts the total number of days a child is placed in out-of-home care until a child is reunified with their family, permanently placed with kin, adopted, emancipated, or placed in a foster home until age of majority*. Permanency status is tracked from a child's initial placement for up to 36 months. Using data currently available in PIJ and SIRTf (the placement database), it is only possible to consistently measure three types of placement status: reunification with parents or extended family, adoption and currently in care. Cases coded as "other" involve situations where children were no longer in placement within the resources of BYFC; however, even though the discharge status for these cases was not clearly coded, it is suspected that many involve children who left placement to live with extended family.



The placement activities of 34,339 Québec children who spent more than 72 hours in out-of-home care between 2002 and 2008 were followed, with 1,909 of these children placed in the care of BYFC.

Between 2002/03 and 2007/08, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of children who were returned home within 36 months of placement, across Québec. In comparison, BYFC has a higher proportion of children who return home within 36 months of placement. As shown in **Figures 3 & 4**, at BYFC 61% of children were reunified within 36 months

2% had been adopted. It is suspected that Québec reunification numbers underrepresent the proportion of children who are reunified, primarily because of data quality issues in some jurisdictions. In comparing median days in care for children who returned home, children in the care of BYFC spent an average of 147 days in care, compared to 196 days province wide.

At the provincial level, a reunification study by Esposito (2012) reports that of the 24,196 children placed in out-of-home care for the first time between April 1, 2002 and March 31, 2011, half returned to live with their biological families within the first 175 days of the initial placement. Children aged 14 to 17 years old at initial placement were reported to have the highest chances of reunifying, with children aged 2 to 5 years old at initial placement having the lowest reported likelihood of returning to live with their family of origin. Half of all 14 to 17 year olds in care return to live with their family of origin within 112 days of initial placement followed by 197 days for 10 to 13 year olds, 272 days for 6 to 9 year olds, 253 for 0 to 1 year olds, and 283 days for 2 to 5 year olds (Esposito, 2012).

The findings in Esposito (2012) and descriptive data from BYFC are consistent with previous research on family reunification, in that the majority of children reunify with their families within the first year of out-of-home placement (Wulczyn, 2004; Courtney 1994; Courtney & Wong, 1996; George, 1990; Sinclair, Baker & Lee, 2006, Barber & Delffabro, 2004). However, because the Québec youth protection legislation does not permit extensions of temporary placement past the maximum durations stipulated in the Youth Protection Act (2007), it is essential that child protection workers continue to quickly mobilize services and resources that aid parents, children and families to work toward achieving reunification and the resolution of their difficulties.

Conclusions

Similar to the provincial averages, BYFC shows downward trends for out-of-home placement rates, the number placement moves and the number of children still in care 36 months after placement. At BYFC, the rate of placement has decreased from 22% to 18% and from 25% to 18% across Québec. After 36 months of placement, BYFC shows more children returned home (61%) compared to the provincial average (50%).

The number of placement changes experienced by children in

out-of-home care at BYFC has also decreased from an average of 2.26 to 1.81 compared to 2.13 to 1.87 province wide. Although these results are positive, a number of children experience higher rates of placement moves than the BYFC and provincial average. At BYFC, 21% of children in out-of-home care experience four or more moves, compared to 19% across Québec. In order to better understand placement instability, further analysis is required to determine the profiles of children who are most likely to experience multiple placement changes. It would be relevant to determine what are the similarities and differences in the needs that these specific children have? What child, parent-child, family and environmental interventions can be used to increase their resilience and decrease risk factors? What risk and protective factors do this group of children present with?

While the majority of children placed in out-of-home care return home, 22% of children placed in the care of BYFC are still in out-of-home care beyond the 36 month period, similar to the provincial average of 26%. Additional analysis is needed to determine which subgroups of children are the least likely to be reunified with family and what factors contribute to an increased likelihood of remaining in care, across all age groups. Closer analysis of the clinical profiles of these children should help gain a better understanding of the context, stability and permanency of these long term placements.

¹ The project, entitled “*Gestion fondée sur les indicateurs de suivi clinique*”, is funded by the Youth Centres and a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for the Building Research Capacity with First Nations and Mainstream Youth Protection Services in Québec.

² Each indicator compares BYFC to Québec, however, BYFC is also included in the overall Québec average.

³ The duration requirement was included in the definition to eliminate episodes of short emergency placements that do not lead to out-of-home placement.

⁴ New placement is defined as no prior placement in the last 12 months.

Linda See, Program Coordinator-Access and Review

During the time that data was collected regarding the placement indicators, BYFC was making steady progress in the domain of permanency planning. **The impact of the Permanency Planning Policy and the creation of two permanency planning teams potentially impacted the number of children who returned home and decreased the number of moves for children in care.** BYFC worked hard to establish a comprehensive approach to permanency planning to ensure that the identified youth receive cohesive, comprehensive and multidisciplinary interventions by conducting permanency planning conferences, frequent monitoring and the use of the Plan de Vie Committee when difficulties arose. **The gains highlighted in the article demonstrate the efficacy of our approach in many cases and the need to continue to provide our permanency planning cases with the extra monitoring and support required.** In the last 18 months, the agency has abolished the permanency planning teams. The same approach and expectations remain in place for permanency planning cases, however all AM teams now receive permanency planning cases. As an agency, we must continue to strive to provide a high level of service that remains consistent for our permanency planning cases.

Evidence-Based Substance Use Initiative

Rebecca Miller, APPR, DPS

Substance use is a common issue that arises with many of the families that we work with. For a child, having a parent who misuses substances puts them at risk for both short term and long term difficulties. There is currently a lack of standard practice within Batshaw Centres regarding how we intervene with parents who have substance use difficulties. We are currently in the process of developing guiding principles and practice guidelines for working with parents who use substances. An evidence-based practice approach is being used to develop these guidelines to ensure that best practice will be followed with regards to the impact of substances on parents as well as on their children and to allow for evidence based interventions with this clientele. No two people who abuse substances are alike and neither are their children. Therefore practice guidelines must allow for the variations in the substances used by clients, the extent of the use and the impact that this is having on their children. We are committed to establishing a unified and consistent approach to substance use to allow more coherent and clinically sound case planning and decision-making. Keep your eye out for the launch of this initiative in the winter 2013.

Academic Functioning of Children Receiving Batshaw Services

Lise Milne, Aline Bogossian and Pamela Weightman¹

Problem

Increasing attention is being paid to the relationship between child maltreatment and poor academic performance, grade repetition, and behavior problems (Stone, 2007). Studies documenting grade delay of children involved with child protection services have confirmed that nearly one fifth of children are at least one year behind their age appropriate grade (Coughlin, Esposito, Milne & Trocmé, 2010). Academic performance among children in out-of-home placement has also been shown to be significantly lower than the general student population (Mitic & Rimer, 2002; Stone, 2007; Yu, Day, & Williams, 2002). For many children, however, a high degree of educational disadvantage has often occurred prior to placement in out-of-home care (Francis, 2000), supporting the need to pay close attention not only to the academic needs of children in out-of-home placement, but to those of children receiving services while living at home (Lee & Jonson-Reid, 2009).

In order to obtain a portrait of overall academic functioning for children receiving services from Batshaw Youth and Family Centres (BYFC), an exploratory study was conducted by reviewing the case files of a random sample of 150 children age 9 to 16 years (mean age 13) who were enrolled in a Lester B. Pearson School Board (LBP) school. Specifically, the study examined the relationship between grade delay and academic difficulties. Characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity, reason for service and placement status were also examined.

Methods

A denormalized PIJ dataset containing demographic and case information (date of birth, gender, ethnicity, reason for service, and whether or not the child was placed in out-of-home care) was merged with information obtained from LBP (academic grade level, coding, services). A qualitative review of PIJ files was conducted for all academic-related information compiled within the past year. This information was col-

lected from the most recent psychosocial report (Evaluation, Orientation/Court or Review report) as well as from two fields in PIJ designed to capture academic-related information.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that for our sample of 150 children, well over one third ($n=59$, 39.3%) had an academic difficulty noted by LBP, while 18.7% ($n=28$) had been held back at least one grade behind peers their age. In total, nearly half ($n=70$, 46.7%) of the children were either delayed one grade, identified as having an academic difficulty, or both (see Table 1).

Table 1

Academic Functioning Profile

	N	%
Grade Delay <i>only</i>	11	7.3%
Academic difficulty <i>only</i>	42	28.0%
Both	17	11.3%
Neither	80	53.3%
Total	150	100.0%
Grade Delay <i>total</i> (11 + 17)	28	18.7%
Academic difficulty* <i>total</i> (42 + 17)	59	39.7%

*As coded by LBP

¹Original study completed with Sonia Cisternas, Kristin Gionfriddo, Natasha Sobers and Marisa Trentadue

Grade Delay

Nearly one in five children were found to be delayed a grade. A majority of these children were receiving BYFC services for a form of *neglect*, followed by *serious behavioral disturbances* and *psychological maltreatment*. Almost half of the children with a grade delay were living in out-of-home care. Incongruence was noted between the information located in the LBP files compared to PIJ files: less than half of the PIJ files contained notes related to academic services received. A review of psychosocial reports revealed that absenteeism and other academic problems were the most frequently noted school problems for children with grade delays².

Academic difficulty

Nearly 40% of the 150 children in the sample were identified by LBP as having a serious academic difficulty requiring services. The majority of children with an academic difficulty were receiving BYFC services for a form of *neglect* and several others for *serious behavioral disturbances*. Just under half of children were placed in out-of-home care. The most commonly LBP-reported problems included behavior problems and severe learning difficulties. Again, there was incongruence between LBP files and PIJ files: less than a third of the PIJ files for children with academic difficulties contained notes regarding academic services or functioning. PIJ psychosocial reports revealed that most of these children experienced academic difficulties and exhibited behavior problems.

Both grade delay and academic difficulty

Just over one in ten youth ($n=17$, 11.3%) experienced both a grade delay and a serious academic difficulty as identified by LBP. Most were receiving BYFC services for a form of *neglect* or *physical abuse*. Less than half were placed in out-of-home care. Psychosocial reports revealed that absenteeism, academic, and behavior problems were common among these children. Fewer than half of these children were receiving educational services according to their PIJ file.

Significance of gender, age, ethnicity, reason for service, and placement status

Gender had a significant effect on both grade delay and academic difficulties, with boys three times more likely to have a grade delay and two and a half times more likely to have an academic difficulty coded by LBP. A significant relationship was also found between age and grade delay, with the majority of delay occurring in older children for both boys and girls. The majority of academic difficulties coded by LBP were found among older children; however the relationship was not significant. While ethnicity was significantly associated with grade delay, it was not associated with academic difficulty coding. The reason for BYFC service was significantly associated with grade delay and academic difficulties. Finally, and somewhat surprisingly, placement in out-of-home care was not found to have a significant association with either grade delay or academic difficulty.

² Grade delay, considered a fairly crude measure, should be interpreted in conjunction with other indicators of academic functioning.

Conclusion

This exploratory study provides a portrait of the academic functioning of children involved with BYFC and echoes the results of previous research suggesting a link between child maltreatment and poor overall academic functioning. The research highlighted the need to pay close attention to the academic needs of these children, particular those involved for neglect, to ensure that adequate services are provided. Social work practice implications were also revealed, including the importance of accurate, up-to-date recording of educational information in youth protection files that may influence the types of supports and recommendations made for these children. The study reinforced the need for BYFC and educational organizations to continue to collaborate and improve channels of communication to ensure continuity of academic services for these children. On a broader level, a comprehensive understanding of the educational status of youth will help inform and facilitate the development of programs and policies designed to better support their school functioning. These might potentially mediate some of the negative outcomes inherent in child maltreatment. Further analysis of the challenges faced by youth protection workers and educational organizations would be helpful in actualizing these goals.

Did You Know?

Jaime Wegner-Lohin, McGill Centre for Research on Children and Families

Children receiving youth protection services are at an increased risk of academic delay. Although youth protection agencies can document school information in various ways, less than 25% of school information is currently documented in PIJ for children receiving youth protection services in Québec. Consequently, it is currently impossible to report on the proportion of school-aged children who are placed in the age appropriate grade (age-to-grade ratio) or academic functioning across the province. The Association des centres jeunesse du Québec (ACJQ), in partnership with Batshaw Youth and Family Centres and the Centre for Research on Children and Families at McGill University, have created a provincial consultation committee with the mandate to develop a provincial age-to-grade ratio indicator. Over the next year, the committee will operationalize the indicator, analyze and extract the data for the province. Through gaining an understanding of the academic functioning of children involved with youth protection services, we can better support success in school.

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