Paper title: Permanency in a Social Structural Context

Background and Purpose: How services are organized and the social structural characteristics of place are thought to influence service utilization and outcomes within the child welfare system. However, there has been too little research that tackles these issues. This is a problem of theory, data, and methods. For theoretical perspective, the authors draw on the theory of social organization and ask whether children are more likely to achieve permanency based on where they live.

Methods: Children included in the sample were placed into out-of-home care for the first time (N=73,000) in 2004 and followed for 4 years, using discrete time, multi-level models. Level-1 covariates include attributes of the children (i.e., age) and their placement history (e.g., placement type); level-2 covariates include poverty rates, proportion of families that are single parent, proportion black, and the placement rate/1000, measured at the county level.

Results: As expected, context affects permanency outcomes although not always in ways that theory would indicate. For example, poverty rates are an indicator of social stress within the community, which suggests that poverty rates and reunification rates would be linked. Our results show otherwise. The results do indicate that placement rates are important in that counties that admit more children/1000 tend to move children to permanency more quickly. Last, the findings indicate contextual effects are most important early on. As children linger in care, the impact of context dissipates.

Conclusions and Implications: Context is important and cannot be ignored when assessing what happens to children and why. Placement processes and exit processes appear to be linked - counties with high entry rates tend to have exit rates. Third, the nuances associated with contextual effects are more easily detected (i.e., the interaction with time-in-care) with discrete time models within the HLM framework.