CH 21

A STUDY OF RESULTS OF A CHILD-PLACING SOCIETY

A PAPER PRESENTED BEFORE THE
CHILDREN'S SECTION OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHARITIES AND CORRECTION
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, MAY 18, 1915

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FOREWORD

In response to a general desire to obtain copies as early as possible the Russell Sage Foundation has decided to print three remarkable papers read at the National Conference of Charities and Correction in Baltimore; one by Mr. C. C. Carstens of Boston on "A Community Plan in Children's Work," one by Mr. J. Prentice Murphy of Boston on "A Study of Results of a Child-Placing Society," and one by Mr. William J. Doherty of New York on "A Study of Results of Institutional Care."

A single copy of one pamphlet only will be furnished free; additional copies at five cents each; ten or more copies at three cents each.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Having been acquainted with the work of the Boston Children's Aid Society for more than fifteen years, the editor feels that Miss Lawton and Mr. Murphy in their conscientious frankness have not done full justice to the work of the society. The dissatisfaction and the sense of partial failure which they express are due largely to the high ideals which the society has cherished. It would be very unjust to undervalue the Boston Children's Aid Society because of the frankness of its statement.

This study is a most helpful contribution toward the standardization of the child-placing work of the United States. It is sincerely to be hoped that other child-placing societies will study their own work with similar discrimination and will publish the results with corresponding courage.

HASTINGS H. HART.

A STUDY OF RESULTS OF A CHILD-PLACING SOCIETY

By Ruth W. Lawton, *Research Worker*, and
J. Prentice Murphy, *General Secretary Boston Children's Aid Society*

This paper is the result of a most careful consideration of certain phases of our work as a social agency. It was written partly to present some findings of our study which we have been conducting for the last year and a half, and partly as a protest against the tendency of social agencies to under-state the great fallibility of their work. If social work is ever to develop into a profession, searching analysis and criticism of methods and results, no matter what the consequences may be, become prime essentials.

On October 1, 1913, the Boston Children's Aid Society added a research worker to its staff, the expenses of her work for the first two years being met from a special gift coming from one of the directors. This director, and others of the board and staff, were anxious to have the society study in a broadly interpretive way some of the economic and social problems represented in the lives of the children coming to its attention. There was also a desire to see if our particular services as a child-placing society could not be stated in certain exact terms, with the hope that in so doing we might be able to establish certain standards by which we could measure our own work, and which might be of some service to other children's organizations, also inclined to self study. We hope to publish in greater detail certain portions of the study which are only slightly covered in this paper.

Moreover, in this process of measuring our own standards there was a still further desire to see wherein we were failing in our work; for social agencies do frequently fail: often because their professional technique is crude or faulty, and often because no methods short of a fundamental change in social institutions will correct the unsocial conditions so often found. A quick reporting of faulty lines of approach to better social conditions is something that society at large has a right to expect from every social agency, and this can only be done through careful interpretation of the work as it progresses.

Our society has been in existence more than fifty years. During the greater part of this time care for many of the children coming to it was given largely in institutions. For more than ten years, however, it has done no institutional work, providing for its children in normal family homes selected with care. It has aided children without reference to age, sex, religion, or color. A large number of its wards have been delinquent; their treatment by the society being possible because of the plan of family care followed, and the fact that its visitors have not been given more children than they could reasonably care for. It is a fact that many of the delinquent children we have received would have been considered straight institutional problems by most of the children's societies in the United States. The society has also received many children considered as possibly defective mentally, but in need of more careful observation under normal family life before final and accurate diagnoses were possible. A large number of the children received every year are over twelve years of age, and many young, unmarried mothers have been included in this group. This statement of the range of our work is necessary in order that accurate comparison may be made with the work of other child-caring organizations.

Before giving any of our findings it must be said that we have here put down

certain statements of interest that appear bare and uncorrelated, but that as the analysis progresses there will be further correlations of facts and additional interpretations.

We began our study with the idea that the many thousands of families that had come to the society during, say the ten years prior to 1913, and certainly the two thousand and odd children who had been received into care during the same period, presented in their varied and tragic needs an array of ills and results which, if once focused, would produce one or many social documents of very great value. So strongly was this felt by some of us that in the 1912 report of the society explicit reference was made to the wealth of social data buried in the history records of our families. To our great surprise and disappointment we found in 1913, after superficial examination, that our histories as written records were of little value; that although they represented many evidences of good and bad work, there were too few facts on which sound, wise studies could be based. The task, moreover, of getting supplemental data was, of course, entirely out of the question for a number of reasons—chiefly that of expense.

Most social agencies are prone to indulge in this same bromide, namely: that given sufficient money they could do so much in an educational way with their old history records. We do not feel that we are exaggerating when we say that it is perhaps possible to rattle off on the fingers of one hand the children's organizations, and the family treatment organizations as well, scattered over the country, whose records have any general social value whatsoever.

Consider, for example, the unmarried mother problem as American children's charities have handled it. There is the group that believes in the separation of mother and baby, and there is the group that believes in keeping the mother and baby together; yet nowhere can we find a society able to say: here are the careful histories of several hundred mothers whom we have treated in our way, showing results which we think support our plan of treatment. Literally millions of dollars have gone into the care of unmarried mothers in the United States, and yet one looks in vain for a frank and truly scientific statement of what has been done with this problem, and what seemingly can be done. We hoped, for example, when we began our research work to be able to make an immediate study of what we had done for unmarried mothers. The society for years had tried to be flexible in its treatment of the illegitimacy problem; yet we found little in our records from which even rough generalizations could be made.

So we forthwith decided on three things: 1, a statistical schedule to be used in interpreting records from October 1913, on; 2, the completion of at least a certain number of our history records, so as to build up a certain amount of information adequate for future research work; and 3, the making of an intensive study of the children over twelve years of age in care on October 1, 1913. Although some of these children, numbering 129, had been with us for periods varying from five to fifteen years it was necessary, as the study developed, to gather supplemental information for the great majority of them. As it is, there is even now much that we do not know about the children or their families, and which we can never ascertain; yet the 129 children included in the study, coming from 117 families, had involved up to October 1913, an expense approximating $100,000. In spite of all that has been said on the value of careful initial reception inquiries, many of these childern were taken on meagre information, often engaging us in the task of fitting round pegs to square holes, and in some cases exposing communities to great dangers from the acts of exceedingly difficult children.

For certain reasons we consider that careful, searching inquiries are, if any-

thing, even more necessary in children's work than in general family relief work. The poorly investigated child problem may so easily result in a gross misuse of charitable funds. A relief agency will think long before it agrees to a pension of $400 or $500 a year for a family; but a children's agency will spend that much, and more, for the care of the scattered children of one family, without any realization of the financial extent of their problem.

In making these comments about our own society, we do not think for an instant that we stand alone. Our society has been one of a very small group of pioneer agencies which has tried hard to develop and maintain good standards of work for needy children throughout the country. It is evident, however, that in our own case we have not always succeeded, and that there is still much for us to do. It seems fair to add at this point that we consider the standards by which we have measured our work in this study to be high. In the standard by which we have judged our own work we have included searching inquiries before final acceptance of children; complete medical examinations and treatments; mental examinations where there is any indication of defect; an exact adjusting of a high type of foster family to each needy child; visitors of broad training, adequately paid, and not so burdened with children as to be unable to think and plan wisely and unhurriedly for those in their charge.

On the reception inquiry side we found that we had accepted children in very critical need of special kinds of care without knowing the particular defects in heredity which made certain of our treatments unwise or dangerous. For example, we had one exceedingly nervous girl in charge for several years before we discovered that she had an insane grandmother; that her father and mother had both died insane, and that this strain of insanity explained certain characteristics which we had most incorrectly interpreted. We also discovered during the study that another none too robust girl suffering with congenital syphilis had three generations of ancestors with almshouse records, a grandmother who was insane and at one time a state ward, and a mother who was both epileptic and an imbecile. The need of a most protective kind of care, expressed in quietness, careful medical supervision and freedom from strain were indicated as clear essentials; yet in one instance we were planning to put the child under very great discipline because she seemed stubborn.

We also discovered purely by chance, through one of the visitors from Cold Springs Harbor, that one of our wards, a nervous, sensitive girl of great refinement, had a heredity strain of appalling extent, going back three generations and showing that nineteen of her immediate ancestors had been alcoholic, epileptic, neurotic and sexually promiscuous. These facts were only meagrely known to us when we began our long, expensive, and what now promises to be successful service.

With an extremely difficult girl it was found long after we had received her into our care that in addition to having two feeble-minded sisters who were sexually promiscuous, there were among the brothers and sisters of her parents, and their parents, eight individuals who were sexually promiscuous, five of whom were alcoholic.

In 1912 we received a boy, then fourteen years of age, whose father had been cruelly abusive to him. The boy indicated no marked objectionable tendencies and was supposedly progressing in one of our families. Coincident with the charge that he was showing precocious sexual habits involving girls in the school he attended, we learned that sexual perversity had been a prominent family characteristic for over two generations. The boy in question had been born illegitimately, his father having lived with the boy's mother before he married her.

He had also lived immorally with the wife of one of his own brothers. There was another daughter in the family who had been sexually promiscuous before our boy was taken from his home, and at that time was pregnant. There was an aunt who served a term in prison for having caused, through cruelty, the death of a nephew. This aunt and her husband were both worthless, the man being an alcoholic and a bum. Another brother of the father was also sexually uncontrolled and had married three times. With such a background it was dangerous for us to have placed this boy except with a foster mother and under a visitor completely informed.

In no instance would it have been easy for us to have secured all this information when the children were first received; but that we learned much of it years afterward is proof that in some cases we could, and should, have had it from the start.

A number of eugenic charts were made during the study; something every children's worker should do for at least the families of the most difficult children in care. The strains and taints of families when plotted out in such a way stand out strikingly, and there is not as much danger that one will fail to provide against them in after treatment. Not to know these facts, and many more, is a great weakness in child-caring work. It is often remarked by certain children's agencies that they care only for good, wholesome orphans, and that really careful and searching inquiries are therefore unnecessary in their work. The true social worker knows, however, that the destructive causes affecting families work broadly, and that any of the conditions noted for this small group of children might just as easily be found in a church home or a day nursery.

In the matter of applications made for the children involved in the study, we discovered that 30 per cent of the families involved made two or more applications before we took action; thirteen families applied three times each, and five families applied four times each before anything happened. We do not know just how significant this is, but we have wondered why we did not see the need for removal when we made our first contacts. There is much error in all of our diagnostic work, and it seems that it would be of value for us to determine whether the conditions which permitted final action were present at the time of the first application, and just why we failed to take account of them. It is beyond question that in some instances we had determined that the children should be removed from their homes because of conditions found there, but we were unable to act because the parents refused to give their support to our plan. In some instances months elapsed between the first and last applications, the children finally coming to us in much more serious plight than at the time of the first application. We also discovered long waits between the dates when the last applications were made and the dates when the children were placed in families; very few children being placed within ten days after the last application. It will be of value to study this further in comparing the family home type of care with the institutional type of care, because the institution may accept a child at once, whereas in difficult cases some time is required for the family agencies to find the home that exactly fits the child. It should be remembered in this connection that no one institution would have been able to receive all the varied types included in this study.

During the time the children were in care up to October 1913, the general physical condition of 91 of them averaged good or excellent; for 38 the average was fair or below. A total of 440 visits each year from physicians are recorded for the period studied, less than one third of these visits being by local physicians.

The general tendency was for the children longest in care to show the highest health averages. It is against our credit that only 37 general physical examinations and 4 mental examinations were made for these 129 children before they were first placed. Two, and probably three girls out of the 60 in the group, one half of whom were over twelve years of age when received, contracted gonorrhea while in our care, and two became pregnant while in our care; one of these two became pregnant twice.

We ascertained, on the mental side, that 26 had been examined; for the other cases we are giving the visitors' estimates. One hundred and three children were considered normal, six backward, twenty subnormal and defective.

At the date of the study, October 1, 1913, 45 of the 69 boys and 25 of the 60 girls were attending school; 26 of the girls and 13 of the boys had left school before coming to us; 10 of the boys and 8 of the girls left school while in our care; and 1 left school and went to work at the date of application, although he remained in his own home as a probation oversight case. During placements the children attended a total of 194 different public schools, 163 of which were studied. All but 5.5 per cent of these schools were standard graded schools; 113 were within one half mile of the children's homes and a total of 139 within a mile. It is of value to have this information respecting the schools because fears have often been expressed that we, along with many other placing-out societies, were sending most of our children to ungraded schools located at great distances from the children's homes, and thus offering them school services far below those offered to them in their own city schools. Of the 73 children in school the greatest number were fourteen years of age or under; 24 were attending high or normal schools. The children were on the whole about a year behind the average grade per age for children living in their own homes—which indicates nothing for our children except that they started under handicaps which do not hold for most children.

It is our special task to provide for needy children in family homes. We are emphasizing the family type of care for children as contrasted with the institutional type of care emphasized by certain other children's societies. In the performance of this work we have tried to standardize the service of the family plan agencies. To repeat again, one very important motive back of this special study has been the gathering of material which would make it possible for us to compare the family plan of service with the institutional plan of service on something more than an emotional basis.

The material gathered during the study with reference to our use of foster homes and the supervision of our children in these homes does seem of very special value. We found that up to October 1913, these 129 children had been cared for in a total of 498 homes or families, this being an average of almost four homes for each child. This, of course, includes the homes selected for temporary care as well as the homes selected for permanent care. For the 498 homes there were 528 placements, which is an average of more than four placements for a child. Thirty-seven per cent of all the placements were temporary, which may indicate one weakness in our family plan. In other words, more than one third of all placements were made temporarily in families, without thought of their special adaptation for the children, in order that the visitors might have time to find other families able to provide the particular and special training needed. Of the 528 different placements, 330 were made with the idea that they would be permanent, 319 homes being used in this connection, and 179 were only temporary, 128 homes being used for this purpose. It was found that the girls had a higher percentage

for temporary placements than the boys, the difference being 4 per cent less for the boys.

We were surprised to find the average number of placements per child so small. We felt before the study began that we should find a much greater shifting about. It would be of interest to know how our average compares with the averages of other child-placing societies and institutions doing some child-placing work. It seems that here is one way in which we can compare the stability of service rendered by child-placing agencies with the stability of service rendered by institutions. The study has included a great many of the aspects of our approach to this problem of child care—including a careful analysis of the 498 homes used for the children covered by the inquiry. Through this information which is just being assembled we expect to get a very comprehensive picture of the actual training places we have been using—for such we consider our foster homes to be.

Most of our children are placed within fifty miles of Boston, a fact which holds for practically all of the private child-placing societies in Boston. It is doubtful if very many other child-placing organizations scattered over the country are as close to their placing territories. This nearness of homes to office makes possible frequent telephone conversations with the foster parents, and frequent visits on the part of the foster parents or the children to Boston to see the visitors.

The actual number of placements for certain groups of children were ascertained to be about as follows: 11 boys in care for a year were found to have had 18 placements in 13 different homes; 12 boys in care two years were placed 21 times in 21 homes; 4 boys in care four years had been placed 11 times in 11 homes; 6 boys in care six years had been placed 18 times in 15 homes; 3 girls in care five years had been placed 8 times in 8 homes; 8 girls in care two years had been placed 11 times in 11 homes; 4 girls in care ten years had been placed 9 times in 9 homes, and 1 girl in care twelve years had been placed 5 times in 4 homes.

It was found with the boys that the tendency was to transfer directly from one permanent home to another without an interval of temporary placement in one of the families in or near Boston. There are several reasons for this: first, wage or free homes for boys are apt to be at a far greater distance from the office than the wage or free home used for girls; secondly, the man in the country gives more warning for the removal of a boy than the woman does who is in charge of a girl; the reasons for removal do not appear to be, and actually are not as urgent in nature as those in a girl's case.

It is our purpose to select our families so carefully, and with such concern for the special fitness of the particular children to the particular homes selected that the caring families, under the oversight of our visitors, will be generally responsible for the training of the children received. It is necessary, of course, for our visitors to make certain visits to these families from time to time. This is another point for which the family plan agencies are criticised; namely, that their supervision is not close or adequate enough. It can not be stated too strongly that numbers of visits alone are no indication of supervision efficiency. Days may be spent in finding a home with the right training adjustments for a child, and by very reason of the care exercised at the start there can safely be fewer supervision visits than in the case of a child hurriedly placed in a home possessing no special qualifications.

We discovered that with each of our visitors having an average of 45 children in care (this has held for the last five years, but was as high as 100 when some of the children studied first came to us), the homes of the boys were visited every three

months and nineteen days; the homes of the girls every two months and nineteen days; the average for both being three months and five days. The averages indicate that our visitors are seeing the boys in their homes less than four times a year, the girls in their homes less than five times a year. These visits cover all personal contacts made directly with the homes of the children, and represent 75 per cent of all contacts between the children and the visitor, the remaining 25 per cent representing occasions when the child was seen away from the home. We might expect that the percentage of visits to the homes for boys would be even larger if there were not a tendency to make temporary placements for boys in or near Boston when, because of our knowledge of the homes and the fact that the boys were coming frequently to the office, close oversight was not required. But this tendency is partly offset by another tendency: given a boy in a temporary home in the metropolitan district, especially if he is placed near the office, he frequently reports to the visitor at the office; possibly this happens every day for a week or two, if the boy is that long awaiting permanent placement. For the girls, on the other hand, more contacts are made outside the foster home than in the case of boys. First, because the girl is not placed as remotely from Boston, and therefore comes into the city for shopping, at which times the visitor sees her. Secondly, there are many girls who must be within reach of out-patient clinics or physician for the purpose of receiving medical treatment and close oversight of hygiene.

Our visitors in considering the children studied agreed that out of the total 129 involved, only 70 had been truly and adequately supervised throughout the whole period; 14 were inadequately supervised for only part of the time and 42 inadequately supervised for practically all of the time. When we say that only 70 out of the 129 children were considered to have been adequately supervised over the whole period, we do not mean that the remainder have all necessarily suffered through inadequate oversight, because the majority of the remainder have been, and are, doing very well in the homes to which they have gone; but their progress is something for which we can not ask praise because of what we have done. Adequate supervision calls for intimate and continuous oversight and knowledge of the children and the homes under care.

The reasons given for the inadequate supervision of 42 of the children noted were as follows: too many cases assigned a new visitor during her first year; too many cases assigned to a visitor throughout her whole term of service; ineffectiveness of a visitor as to training and personality; too frequent change of visitors; changing of visitors at a critical time when the child would not accept the new authority; too long lapses between visits of two different visitors; inadequate and insufficient reception inquiries so that the placing visitors had no information with which to do their work; case work handicapped because of reorganization in the office; too frequent change of homes and too distant placements; vocation plan for and preparation of child neglected; visiting sufficiently frequent but careless in interpretation; frequent visiting but insufficient for certain difficult children; conflict of authority in the minds of foster parents because the authority of previous visitor who had retained guardianship was held above that of the new visitor; placing undue confidence in the foster home and thus visiting less frequently than later results indicated to be wise; interference of child's family with the work of the society; failure to recognize mental defects and less difficult cases overshadowed by more difficult sisters or brothers.

We found that the average period a child was under one visitor was one year, six months and fifteen days, so that every one of these children had a change of

visitor every year and a half. This, of course, as every placing-out worker knows, is a very serious condition of affairs, because the supervision visitors for placing-out societies hold a control and a knowledge of the children and their special families that can not be passed on to other people with ease, or with any degree of certainty. The continuity of service for visitors of a placing-out society for at least five-year periods is an absolute essential. We found that the mere fact of visitors leaving our staff for the purpose of getting higher salaries with other agencies was responsible for 122 out of a total of 230 transfers of children from one home to another. We feel the study proves that payment of better salaries and more careful selection of visitors, with the view of their terms of service averaging higher than those which we found for our own society, will tend to remedy some of the most serious weaknesses indicated in this paper. Undoubtedly some of the failures in our services were largely due to the fact that we were not able to take up the slack in the line quickly enough between the time when one trained visitor left us and the time when her successor became experienced enough to handle given problems with efficiency. This is a powerful argument for more careful training of workers before entrusting them with the supervision of different and difficult children.

These results as submitted challenge the services of every child-placing organization. If, with an average of 45 children per visitor for most of the period studied, we are forced to report such findings for our own society, what must conditions be with organizations averaging from one to two hundred children for each visitor?

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHARITIES AND CORRECTION

The address printed in this pamphlet is one of the 116 delivered at the 47 different sessions of the Forty-Second National Conference of Charities and Correction, which was held at Baltimore for a week in May, 1915. This Conference is an outgrowth of the Social Science Association, and was originally a gathering of the few members of state boards of charities which were in existence in the '70's. Its membership now represents every variety of social service activity, voluntary and governmental, and every shade of religious and social opinion. Anyone interested in its objects is eligible for membership, and all members are entitled to its Bulletins and volumes of Proceedings.

Many of the social reforms now well established in America were first advocated at this Conference, which exists to discuss social problems and disseminate information with regard to them but does not formulate platforms.

The sessions of 1916 will be held at Indianapolis. Annual membership for those who join in 1915, $2.50; after January 1, 1916, $3.00; sustaining membership, $10.00.

Address for further information about publications, membership, program of the next Conference, etc.,

Wm. T. Cross, *General Secretary*,
315 Plymouth Court, Chicago, Ill.