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New homes, different places : demographic transitions in the Worcester County MA foster care system : a project based upon an investigation at Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program in Worcester MA

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Demographic Transitions in the
Worcester County MA Foster Care
System

ABSTRACT

This case study examines the broader trends in demographic change experienced by children in the foster care system in Worcester County, Massachusetts by comparing information regarding removal and placement locations of youth in the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program with 2000 census data describing the poverty levels, household incomes and racial composition of these locations.

The findings demonstrate that children were likely to be removed from areas with high levels of poverty and low numbers of non-Hispanic white residents and placed into areas with low levels of poverty and high numbers of non-Hispanic white populations. This demographic analysis is contextualized within geographical theories of place to explore the political and systemic implications of these spatial trends. This study argues that a more integrated, self-reflexive and systemic approach to the issues faced by youth and their families in the foster care system is necessary in order to avoid the reproduction and perpetuation of race and class oppressions experienced by children in the foster care system, and to assure the delivery of ethical and effective services to today's fostered youth.

NEW HOMES, DIFFERENT PLACES: DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITIONS IN THE

WORCESTER COUNTY MA FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

A project based upon an investigation at the Y.O.U., Inc.
Foster Care Program in Worcester MA, submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Social Work.

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Introduction

Studies have shown that children of racial minorities and from families with low economic status are disproportionately represented in the admission, discharges and delivery of services within the child welfare system (Freidthler, Darcey, & LaScala, 2006; Lery, 2009; Shaw, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, & Needell, 2008; Timms, 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2009; Weigensberg, 2010). Current research on the child welfare system also indicates that demographic indicators such as race and class status play an important role in determining the utilization of services, life outcomes for youth in the system, and in assessing the effectiveness and equity of the foster care system (Freidthler et al., 2006; Lery, 2009; Weigensberg, 2010). In the United States the nature of the child welfare system, and particularly the foster care system, often necessitates the movement of children from one geographic location to another. The geographical transitions that children experience as they move through the child welfare system often result in their placement into areas with very different demographic characteristics from their home neighborhoods.

Although existing studies have examined individual cases in which the demographic background of a child is different to that of their foster care family, little attention has been paid to the wider geographical distribution of demographic differences in the foster care system as a whole, and its impact on the construction of place through individual and community identity. This study examines the broader trends in demographic change experienced by children in the foster care system, and presents an argument for a more integrated, self-reflexive and systemic

approach to the issues faced by youth and their families in the foster care system. Such reform is necessary in order to avoid the reproduction and perpetuation of race and class oppressions experienced by children in the foster care system, and to assure the delivery of ethical and effective services to today's fostered youth.

This research uses a case study approach to examine the geographic and demographic transitions experienced by children in one private foster care agency that operates in Worcester County, Massachusetts. The geographical locations of the youths' most recent permanent placement and the locations of the agency foster home are recorded from closed files of youth served by the agency in the period 2000 – 2005. This information was then aggregated with 2000 U.S. Census data to determine the percentage of non-Hispanic white residents, mean annual household income and percentage of population in poverty in each location. This demographic data is analyzed in two stages. First, the data are combined with the removal and placement locations of youth served by the foster care agency in a Geographic Information System (GIS), using baseline maps provided by the Massachusetts Office of Geographic Information (MassGIS). Three maps are generated that visually display the removal and placement locations in the context of each of the chosen demographic indicators. Second, statistical analysis of this information is conducted to identify demographic characteristics of the foster youth's places of removal and placement.

In order to theorize the potential impacts of children's spatial dislocation as they are moved to new places in the foster care system, this study engages with geographic theories of place. Theoretical approaches that understand place as constructed through socio-cultural and political processes as well as phenomenological approaches are particularly relevant in helping conceptualize the relationship between self-identity, community identity and place. This study

argues first that systemic issues of race and class oppression are intimately connected to and perpetuated through the child welfare system's current removal and placement practices, and second, that foster care as a state system has important influences both on collective narratives of race and class, and on the individual identity constructions of the youth living within the foster care system. This study contributes to wider debates within social work regarding racial and economic justice and the role played by social work systems and practitioners as they interact with social oppressions such as racism and classism (Sachs & Newdom, 1999). Furthermore, it works to bring these important discussions to the child welfare system in order to inform agencies, clinicians, case workers and policy makers of some of the specific ways in which racism and classism are manifest within the foster care system.

Literature Review

In the last two decades initiatives such as the Consumer Movement and other client centered movements have lead to a redefinition of best practice within social services, placing greater value on the consideration and incorporation of consumers' voices and experiences into the design and implementation of services (Chamberlin, 1990; Frese, 1997). More recently, the child welfare system has also moved to better incorporate consumers' opinions and experiences. Qualitative research investigating youth experiences of residential transition in the child welfare system has had implications for foster parent training and understanding of behavioral acting out, and has focused energy on minimizing transitions and maximizing reunification, as well as highlighting the need for psycho-educational and skills training to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes for children in the foster care system (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009). The consumer movement has also increased the visibility of the consumer within the agencies and systems that serve them. In response, agencies and their wider systems are now not only considered responsible for knowing and understanding the needs of the populations they serve, but also for constructing their services and professional knowledge based on these understandings. Examining demographic data is a basic method used by social service providers to understand the populations they serve and the issues they may be facing. This literature review provides an overview of recent analyses of the effect of poverty, race and geographical context on the utilization, success (however defined), and formation of child welfare and more

specifically foster care programs. It also provides a review of literature which assesses current demographic information for Massachusetts, Worcester country and the City of Worcester, where this study draws its data.

The introduction of wrap-around initiatives and Children's Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI) services in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, combined with continued empirical research that supports the positive child welfare outcomes of family preservation (Van Puyenbroeck et al., 2009) is changing the child welfare system. In particular, greater attention is now paid to the ways that the foster care system responds to the push and pull factors that inform the removal of children from their homes. As a result, researchers have reported a link between the demography of geographical areas (i.e. household income, ethnicity, and 'social structure') and child welfare issues such as increases in reports of child maltreatment, higher likelihoods of children's removal from homes, and achievement of timely permanency outcomes (See review in: Freidthler et al., 2006; see also: Lery, 2009; Weigensberg, 2010). These researchers suggest that demographic risk factors such as poverty are strongly correlated with a community's use of the foster care system.

Researchers have also begun to discuss the issues of race and ethnicity in the foster care system, highlighting the disproportional representation of racial minorities (Shaw et al., 2008; Timms, 2010) and the importance of considering ethnicity in order to achieve 'successful' foster care placements (Carter, 2009; M. E. Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Quash-Mah, Stockard, Johnson-Shelton, & Crowley, 2010). Based on national statistics reported by the Administration for Children and Families in 2008, 31% of children in the foster care system that year were African American, and African American children are represented at more than twice the rate expected based on the United States population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

Administration for Children and Families, 2009). Additionally, the Adoption and Foster Care

Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) reported that racial disparities were also present in

the number of children entering and exiting the system annually, with 31% of children entering

the foster care system being African American, compared to 26% of those exiting each year

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families,

2009).

It has also been reported that not all races and ethnicities are equally disproportionally

represented (Dworsky et al., 2010). For example depending on geographical location, Latino

children have been either over or under-represented in the foster care system (Dworsky et al.,

2010). Researchers have also suggested that race plays an important role in the delivery of

services pointing out that African American children are not treated equitably in prevention

services, reunification services and adoption services (Chipungu, Everett, & Leashor, 2004).

These researchers suggest that the demographics of the communities in which children reside,

and in particular risk factor demographics (i.e., racial composition, economic income), play an

important role in predicting the welfare challenges the children will face in that community and

in turn, that these demographics will also affect the way in which the foster care system will be

utilized within that community.

It is important to consider race and ethnicity during placement in order to achieve

'successful' foster care placement (Carter, 2009; M. E. Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Quash-Mah et

al., 2010). However, despite the establishment of the importance of considering race in the child

welfare system, best practice for *how* race is considered remains unclear. The Multiethnic Act

and Interethnic Placement Act (*Multiethnic Placement Act*, 1994) and the 1996 amendments

aimed to prohibit delaying or denying the placement of any child on the basis of race, color, or

national origin. This legislation has raised important questions regarding systemic racism, concerns over racial matching or non-matching in placements, and trans-racial adoptions, and is an example of the difficulty of establishing policy which addresses racial disparities and encourages racially sensitive practices (Mallon & Hess, 2005, p. 23).

Demographics are linked to geographic context both by physical and social location, embedded in and affected by social constructions of space. Researchers have reported that the use and implementation of the foster care system varies according to geographical location. For example, children of color are more likely to be over represented in the foster care system in urban areas, and similarly there is disparity in whether Latino children are over or under represented in the foster care system, based on their geographical location in urban or suburban areas (Dworsky et al., 2010). Geography and social work also have a long working history: social work's historical roots are embedded in the idea that social problems are often clustered in specific geographical locations. Settlement houses and charity organizations were created on a place-based theory of social welfare (Kemp, 2010). Even in the early days of settlement houses it was clear that there was a connection between geographical location, community demographics and social welfare. Geographical approaches have been used in social welfare research to illustrate simple geographical locations and frequencies of occurring demographics, such as mapping the features of faith based practices (Hugen, 2004). More recently, however, geographic perspectives have been used in a more complex manner to provide a theoretical look at the intersection of co-occurring demographics and socio-economic processes such as race, gentrification and levels of home equity (Glick, 2008). Geographical approaches, particularly those that focus on the spatial distribution of social welfare outcomes, therefore provide a lens to look at the intersection of the foster care system and community demographics within a spatial

context. The use of cartography has also been increasingly and ever more creatively used as a tool to visually illustrate the links between social welfare, social justice and constructions of place and space (Harmon, 2009).

On a national level, Massachusetts ranks well in child welfare statistical indicators, in 2010 Massachusetts was ranked fifth in the Anne E. Casey Foundation's Children's Count overall state child welfare rankings (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). However within Massachusetts there are geographical areas that utilize child welfare systems (such as the Department of Children and Families (DCF)) at the state average, but which present important differences in other child welfare demographic wellness indicators. For example, the statistics for Worcester County suggest that there is little difference in the number of supported DCF investigations from the state average: in 2005-2007 Worcester County DCF-supported investigations for ages 0-5 were 4% and for ages 6-11 were 3% while the state averages for DCF-supported investigations were 3% and 2% for these age groups respectively (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). However Worcester County differs dramatically in other child wellness indicators. For example, from 2005-2007 18% of children in Worcester County were considered to be living in poverty; This is 8% higher than the rate of poverty in the state of Massachusetts as a whole (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011), and since the poverty levels of Worcester County are included within the state statistics it can be inferred that the contrast between Worcester and that of the rest of the state is even more dramatic than the comparison above indicates. Additionally 40% of children in Worcester County are either foreign-born or one of their parents is foreign-born, whereas in the state of Massachusetts the rate is 29%. There are also indicators of a marked difference in language use: 65% of households in Worcester County speak English, while for Massachusetts the figure is 81% (The Annie E. Casey

Foundation, 2011). Racially, Worcester County also presents a more diverse population with 52% of the population considered white/non-Latino, whereas in Massachusetts 72% are white/non-Latino (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). These statistics suggest that when compared to the state of Massachusetts as a whole, Worcester County has a more diverse population in terms of race, economic status, language, and culture. These differences suggest that a child moving within the Worcester County foster system may be more likely to experience differences in race, economic status, language and culture between their original home and their foster care location than in a more homogeneous community.

The foster care system, policies and interventions attempt to directly address the needs of youth whose home environment poses significant abuse and neglect risk factors. The experience of entering and navigating the foster care system may pose additional risk factors which negatively impact life outcomes for foster care alumni such as increased stress and attachment issues due to changing environment, increase in delinquency and increase in experience of oppression (Bruskas, 2008; Dozier & Rutter, 2008). This research raises important concerns that call into question the balance between the protective function of our current foster care system and the risk factors that it may produce for its clients. It is thus possible that environmental changes, particularly the change in neighborhood demography between communities of removal and placement, may pose particular challenges to the success of the foster care system. Such transitions may have implications for a child's understanding and construction of their identities within their spatial surroundings. Mitchell's *A Place for Everyone: Cultural Geographies of Race* describes the cultural construction and expression of race as a space related process:

"race is constructed in and through space, just as space is often constructed through race. As a geographical project the co-production of race and space is never uncontested, and thus the spatiality of race often needs ordering and policing" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 230)

Mitchell continues by applying this understanding to micro examples such as gang members wearing 'gang colors' in certain places, as well as macro examples such as the way apartheid created 'racialized places.' The interconnectivity of race and space within a spatialized understanding reframes geographical transitions where race, class and economic indicators differ, as a spatial transition where the construction and expression of these identities may also differ. The spatialization of race, and more broadly of identity construction, has implications for transitions in foster youths' identity construction, reconstruction, and understandings of themselves. It also highlights concerns about whether the children have the necessary tools to transition through such differing landscapes.

In this project I address this wider question through a focus on the processes of foster care placement in Worcester County, Massachusetts, and ask the question: *What, if any, are the demographic differences between the areas from which children in DCF custody are removed and the areas in which they are placed following home removal?*

Theoretical Context

In this study the geographical movement of children through the foster care system is contextualized using the race, class and household census data for their removal and placement locations. The literature review established a correlation between utilization and success of foster care systems based on race, class indicators and geographical context, however we are left wondering why these factors play such an important role in child welfare system and how these issues are experienced by those in relation to the child welfare system. While analyzing demographic data helps highlight structural inequalities in the distribution of foster care removal and placement locations, my purpose in this study is to consider not only what demographic differences exist between removal and placement sites but also what effects these special dislocations might have on the individuals experiencing them. The discussion chapter of this research draws on geographic theory to investigate the role played by place in individuals' emotional connection to, and identity formation through constructions of place, particularly through the construction of race, class and home.

Most simply put, human geographers understand place as 'space that has been made meaningful – or a 'meaningful location'' (Cresswell, 2004, p. 7)

> "Space refers to location somewhere and place to the occupation of the location. Space is about having an address and place is about living at that address … thus, place becomes a particular or lived space." (Agnew, 2005, p. 82)

Theories of place focus on how and why spaces are made into meaningful places. Concepts of 'place' are being used differently across geographical and sociological thought and it is beyond the scope of this research to provide a full introduction to the multitude of understandings and uses of 'place' (Cresswell, 2004; Gieryn, 2000; Withers, 2009). Instead I will focus on two understandings of place: place as a social construct and place as part of a phenomenological approach to identity.

By theorizing place as a social construct, geographers suggest that places do not refer to 'real things.' Rather, constructions of place refer to bundles of different affects, representations, and practices, which together ascribe social meaning and materiality to space (Cresswell, 2004, p. 28). This point of view is concerned with the way meaning and materiality are spatialized through constructions of place. Because place construction is based on lived experience (affects, representations, practices and materialities) and because everyone's lived experience is different, place is not only seen as existing as a shared social construction but also as experienced differently for different people.

While the constructionist approach focuses on place as an intellectual or mental construct, the phenomenological understanding of place suggests that place is not reducible to the intellectual realm (Sack, 1992; Seamon, 1979). In phenomenology, place is intimately tied to the emergence of self and identity, and for philosophers in this tradition, our 'place-ed-ness' is a fundamental part of our *being* in the world (Malpas, 1999). Humanist geographers have worked with this phenomenological understanding of place to suggest that the social and physical worlds are mutually constitutive and the need to *be* in meaningful places is central to human identity and social relations (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). The phenomenological approach suggests that while

place is a human *construction* it is a necessary one; that it is impossible to conceive of identity without place (Cresswell, 2004).

One of the most salient examples of place as a construct necessary to the human experience is the idea of 'home.' In general, geography, from which much of our theory of place is drawn, is the study of the 'earth as the home of humans.' More specifically, geography studies the variety of 'homes' created by societies, communities, families and individuals at different scales (Cresswell, 2004). For many the word 'home' evokes the sense of a structural dwelling within a specific area which hosts a multitude of smaller 'places,' such as bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms. The house as the basic notion of home is also bound to ideas that the primary home provides a retreat from the 'non-home,' and thus provides a 'frame' for all other places (Bachelard, 1994; Heidegger, 1971). Whether 'home' is constructed anywhere from the household to the global scale, our sense of where we are from and the place where we belong is central to our construction of self and identity: 'Home evokes a sense of place, belonging or alienation that is intimately tied to a sense of self' (Blunt & Varley, 2004). Thus as geographers and sociologists study how individuals and society construct both physical and conceptual 'homes' they are also uncovering one of the most basic ways that we conceive and enact our own existence.

This co-construction of identity and place is instrumental to the epistemologies that inform and reflect our emotional and affectual experience of life. For example, in the most romanticized sense the notion of home is a place where we feel comfortable, safe, and secure; the notion of a 'home sweet home' conjures good memories and a sense of belonging, In *House as a Mirror of Self,* Marcus draws on Jungian theories and Gestalt therapy to investigate the role of the 'home' in the process of psychological development, particularly in what she calls the

development of the ego-self and the process of individualization (Marcus, 1995). By conducting

interviews in which participants role play conversations with their homes, Marcus' interviewees

were encouraged to uncover their emotional relationships to home and self. Marcus' findings

reveal the ways in which we both individually and collectively, consciously and unconsciously,

use our homes to express things about ourselves. Most pertinent to this study is Marcus' focus on

childhood memories and experiences of 'home' that demonstrate the importance of childhood

homes and childhood fantasies of home as places in which personality and concepts of self are

developed.

The view of home as the ultimate place of belonging has been strongly criticized for the

white male narrative it produces. Feminists have critiqued this romanticized notion of home,

pointing out that often communities can be stifling and homes are one of the primary locations of

neglect, abuse and oppression, often of children and women.

'So to white feminists who argue that the home was 'the central site of the oppression of

women', there seemed little reason to celebrate a sense of belonging to the home, and even less, I

would add, to support the humanistic geographers' claim that home provides the ultimate sense

of place' (Rose 1993, p. 55).

Alternatively, hooks (2009) has presented the home not as a site to foster a notion of

wider worldly belonging but as a site for resistance to racial and class oppression. Whether seen

as the place of ultimate belonging, a place constructed to oppress, or a site of resistance, affective

experience is inherent in all of these notions of home. These affective experiences might include

belonging, comfort, disempowerment, or resistance, all of which are deeply connected to the

sense of identity developed in that place, which could be as family member, child, women, or racial or economic minority.

A sense of place, particularly in terms of belonging and attachment, often involves the construction of boundaries both geographically and socially. Geographical bounding establishes where is 'inside' and 'outside' a particular place, and social bounding creates social rules through which inclusion and exclusion are practiced. As such, geographical and social constructions of place boundaries determine who can do what, where and why. These constructions thus play an important role in our physical, social and emotional experiences. An extreme example of this is the religiously and politically segregated neighborhoods and counties in Northern Ireland, where specific boundaries, even streets, act as geographical and social markers determining the religious affiliation and thus political orientation of the individuals on either side of the dividing line. It is through the bounding of these neighborhoods and counties into either 'Catholic' or 'Protestant' areas that social rules are established that determine who may go to each place and at what time, who may perform religious practices and where, which political positionality may be expressed in different places, who is considered in allegiance with whom, and most importantly who 'belongs' where (Reid, 2004).

The geographical and social inclusion and exclusion of bounding is particularly important in understanding the role of place in the construction of race and class. Like the example of religiously bound places in Northern Ireland, America's cities are known for their racially bounded neighborhoods born out of America's long and contentious history of racial segregation. The racially segregated nature of America's cities is built on the existence of bounded places where identity, privilege, and emotionally affective experience is strongly linked to race. For example in their geographical and demographic analysis of race relations in Detroit,

Michigan, one of many of America's segregated cities facing desegregation, Welch *et al* (2001) found that the racial make up of different places in Detroit not only had effects in shaping 'life chances' but was also directly and indirectly involved in the shaping the attitude, behaviors and feelings regarding race, opportunity, politics, policy, choice of friends and casual contacts. Welch *et al's* study further questions what happens when the boundaries of tightly racially bounded places are broken down, noting the differences in instances when residential integration and increased proximity to races different to one's own have lead to reduced interracial friction and those which lead to increased interracial friction (Welch et al., 2001, p. 75). Racial desegregation in America has been an example of the sociological and psychological results of the collective changing of bounded places and has resulted in the construction of collective responses such as 'white flight' and gentrification which aim to both challenge and reproduce dominant narratives of race based places.

With the continuous challenging and reconstructing of the boundaries of places, such as through desegregation, access to mobility to move through these different bounded places is also changing. In the late 20th century the combination of feminist and post-modern thought has changed our understandings of identity from a fixed modernist entity to a continual fluid construction and performance of multiple identities, which are strongly linked to social and physical places. This understanding of identity as fluid combined with the 21st century rise in global migration has raised questions about the effects of geographical movement through socially constructed bounded places on identity construction and performance processes. Postmodern understandings of identity in an increasing mobile world are based on the idea that as individuals move through different bounded places we are continually reconstructing and performing ourselves in relation to the social and physical surroundings (Rappaport & Dawson,

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1998). For example Geraldine Pratt applies this notion to the City of Worcester, MA, noting that 'different areas of the city sustained radically different ways of life' (Pratt, 1998, p. 26). Pratt continues to use movement through these areas within Worcester to show 'how particular places not only enable but exact the performance of particular gender, class, and racial identities'(1998, p. 29). Pratt gives the example of women who through the income and social status of their husbands live (and thus construct and perform) middle class lives at home while moving to lower income areas of Worcester to engage and perform working class identities at their places of employment, not taking their middle class lives to their working class work. The movement through these different identities throughout the day requires multiple performances of gender and class identities that are intricately connected to the woman's geographical movement throughout the city (Pratt, 1998).

The effect of geographical movement on identity construction and performance is not just present on the local level. Recent increases in global movement as well as individuals' increased access to the means necessary for multiple relocations of home within short periods of time has called into question how globalization and increased geographical mobility have affected our senses of place. One response to these changes is the idea that globalization is creating a sense of 'placelessness' and more specifically 'homelessness,' as places become increasingly homogeneous and individuals are less rooted to specific locales. For example, Relph (1976) has argued that Americans' increasing mobility, and in particular their frequent transitions between home places has caused a decrease in the importance of the home place and diminished the ability to form 'authentic' relationships with a home place. In this instance Relph uses 'authentic' as a genuine and sincere attitude toward relations to place in which individuals have a level of awareness of this 'authentic' relationship (Cresswell, 2004, p. 44). Relph poses that this

decline in 'authentic' relationships to place is leading to an increase in individuals' sense of placelessness. Additionally Relph (1976) argues that this 'placelessness' negates the processes which allow people to become existential insiders through their construction of a home place (Relph, 1976). He further poses that societies and individuals replace 'authentic' relations to places with 'inauthentic' relationships that are defined by an 'uncritically accepted stereotype, an intellectual of aesthetic fashion that can be adopted without real involvement'(Relph, 1976, p. 78).

Notions of 'placelessness' have been widely criticized for their judgmental 'authentic' vs. 'inauthentic' relationship dyad. However, they continue to pose questions regarding what types of relationships to place are possible within an increasingly mobile and globalized world? These questions are particularly important to this study because of their implications for sense of place and possibility of 'authentic' relationship to place in the child welfare system, which is based on the spatial dislocation of children who are still developing their sense of self. The critique of placelessness or place dislocation within the phenomenological understanding of place raises question about the mental health implications, particularly on identity and ego formation, of the continued geographic movement in children welfare system.

Methodology

This study uses available data concerning the geographical location of the home removals and home placements of children in a private foster care agency and links it to demographic data from the 2000 U.S. Census to determine the racial and economic composition of the removal and placement locations. The resulting spatial dataset is compiled as a Geographic Information System (GIS), in order to analyze and visualize the geographical movement of children within the foster program based on demographic differences in race, household incomes and poverty levels. This analysis is presented both through statistical testing, and through the composition of multivariate maps that depict the 'flow' of children in the DCF system through differing demographic landscapes.

Sample

The sample of cases used in this study is based on a program case study of the Y.O.U., Inc. intensive foster care program in Worcester, Massachusetts. The Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program is small, private foster care program serving children and families throughout the City of Worcester and surrounding Worcester County. This study collects both the geographical location of the child's most recent permanent placement and the geographical location of the child's family of placement during the time the child received services from the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program. This data is collected from closed files pertaining to children placed with a Worcester County based Y.O.U., Inc. foster care family between the years of 2000 and 2005 (n=60). Children who did not have a 'permanent placement' (as designated by their DCF

records) within the five years before being placed in a Y.O.U., Inc. foster care placement were excluded from this study. The location of the participants' historical and current placements are anonymized by recording the locations' census block group ID number rather than the specific address.

This case study is representative of the experiences of children in the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program, and as a privately run but publically funded system it will share some similarities with public and other private foster care programs with in Worcester County. This case study will thus not be generalized to all foster care populations and systems, however it may have implications for the practices of other foster care systems with in Worcester County. While the patterns of transition are not generalizable, the implications for the importance of considering transitional patterns will be applicable to child welfare systems and should be taken into consideration in planning and managing foster care programs particularly due to the need for further understanding regarding the impact of residential transitions on children's mental health and wellbeing. Similarly because the address of the participants are anonymized by creating aggregate data at the block group level, this research is descriptive of area norms (not individuals households) regarding household income, family structures, race and class.

Additionally this demographic analysis represents only one geographical move of these children, many whom have experienced multiple moves – it thus does not attempt to give an overview of the geographical movement across the life span of a child while in the foster care system.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program is analyzed by first joining this data, via census block I.D. numbers, to U.S. census data at the block group level regarding

the percent of population in poverty (defined according to federal guidelines), the median

household income and the percentage of non-Hispanic white residents (U.S. Census Bureau,

2002). I have included both household income and poverty level to highlight the distribution of

monetary means throughout Worcester County but also to account for the population and the

monetary needs of these populations within each home. These data sets are combined as

individual layers in the GIS, and used to produce three pairs of maps. Each pair of maps

addresses one demographic variable, visualized first at the county level and second at the city

level. The data will also be analyzed statistically to generate descriptive trends, of the locations

where children are removed from and the locations they are placed. Additional statistical analysis

will also determine the percent of children who experienced change in racial makeup, annual

household income and poverty level in their removal and placement process and what the nature

of this change was.

Findings

The major findings of the analysis of removal and placement locations of children within the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care system show a general geographical movement of children being removed from inner-city urban Worcester City and placed into more suburban and rural areas of Worcester County. This movement is represented by the graduated dots on Figures 1a – 3b, which represent the foster care program data against the backdrop of demographic data drawn from the U.S. Census. The comparison with demographic data demonstrates that the movement of children from the inner-city urban environment of the City of Worcester to more suburban and rural areas both within the City and elsewhere in Worcester County represents a shift from more racially diverse areas to areas with majority white populations (where white is defined as non-Hispanic white). The data demonstrates that the majority of child placement locations have lower percentages of the population living in poverty than their removal locations, suggesting that the majority of children in the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program are being removed from areas with high rates of poverty and placed in areas with low rates of poverty. In addition to differences in racial composition and poverty level, the data also indicates that foster care placements involve a change in household and family structures (including the number of household occupants, number of children and elderly inhabitants), based on the absence of a significant change in annual average household incomes in comparison to the dramatic decrease in poverty levels. Based on poverty level calculation standards (US Census Bureau, 2011) this difference can be used to infer that while household incomes remain the same, the decreased poverty levels reveal

a reduced number of dependents in each household and thus suggests a difference in area norms

for number of occupants in households as well as how many of these occupants are dependants.

Mean Annual Household Income Findings

The analysis of removal and placement locations as they are related to mean annual

household income show that children entering the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program are most

likely to be removed from areas where annual mean household income is between $0-70,000

annually, and that the majority of these children are then placed into foster care homes in areas

which have annual household incomes between $35,001-70,000. Very few children are removed

from areas with mean annual household incomes over $70,000 and no children are placed in

these areas. These findings suggest that populations in areas with annual mean household

incomes over $70,000 are rarely involved with the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care system, either as

consumers or as foster parents.

Figure 1a

Removal and Placement Locations of Children in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System and Mean Annual Household Income, Worcester County, MA
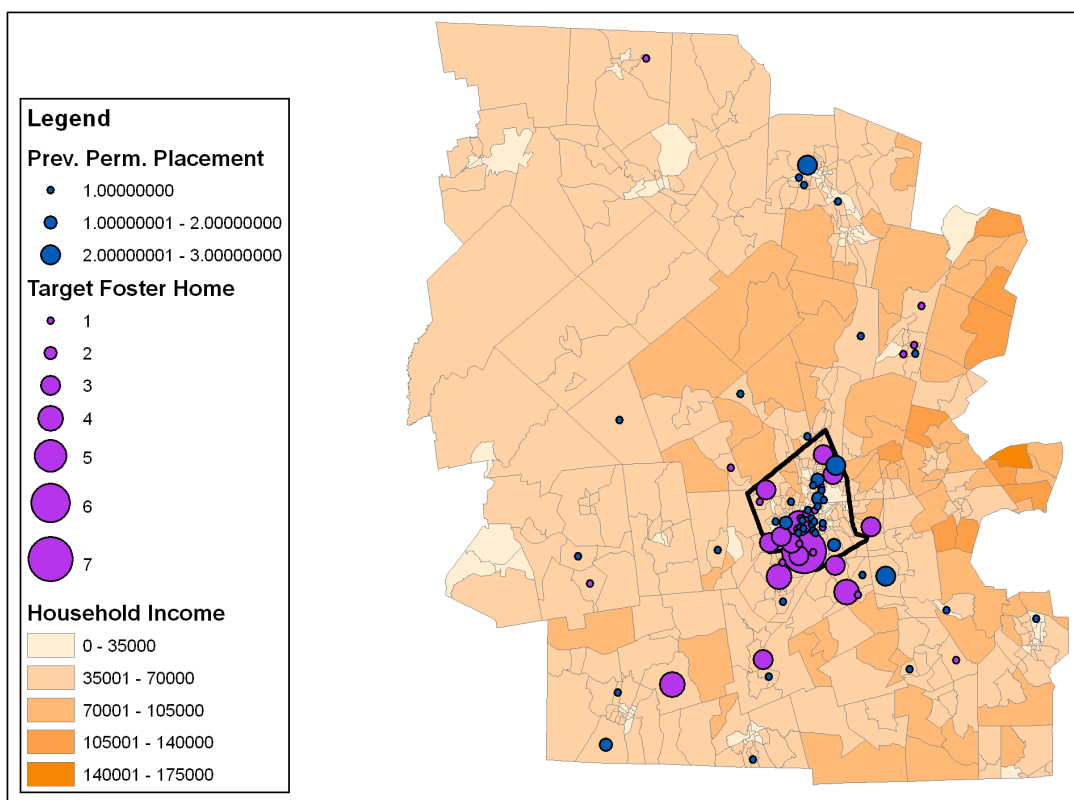
Note. Data adapted from publicly available data from The Massachusetts Geographic Information System (MassGIS) and U.S. Census data.

Figure 1b

Removal and Placement Locations of Children in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System and Mean Annual Household Income, City of Worcester, MA
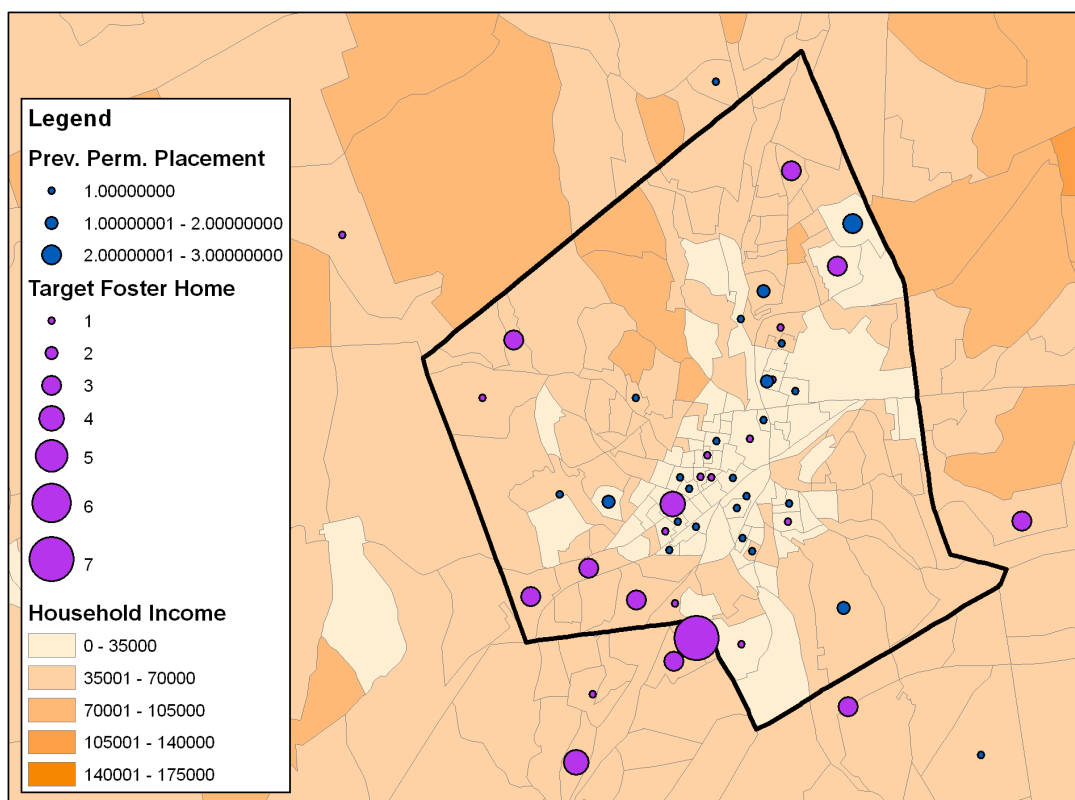
Note. Data adapted from publicly available data from The Massachusetts Geographic Information System (MassGIS) and U.S. Census data.

Figures 1a and 1b display locations of removal and placement in comparison to mean annual household income of census block groups. Removals and placements are clustered around Worcester City, in correlation with the clustering of census blocks that fall into the $0-35,000 income bracket. Figure 1a indicates that the removals and placements which take place outside the City of Worcester occur most frequently in areas which fall into the higher category of

$35,000-70,000 annually. This suggests that areas with an average household income greater

than $70,000 that are largely outside inner-city Worcester have very little involvement with the

Y.O.U., Inc. foster care system.

Table 1

Mean Annual Household Income of Areas Where Children Were Removed Compared to Areas
Where They Were Placed in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System

Income	Removal		Placement	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
$0-35,000	29	48	15	25
$35,001-70,000	23	38	46	75
$70,001-105,000	8	13	0	0
$105,001-140,000	1	2	0	0
$140,001-175,000	0	0	0	0

Note. n = 61. Demographic data adapted from U. S. Census Bureau Data for Worcester County, MA (2000).

Table 1 indicates that the majority of children are removed from areas in the lower

household income brackets, and that as household income increases, the number of removals

decreases significantly. 48% of the children in this study where removed from areas where mean

household income was between $0-35,000 annually, 38% came from areas where mean

household income was between $35,000 and $70,0000, 13% came from areas where mean

household income was between $70,001 and $105,000, 2% from areas where mean household

income was between $105,001-$140,000. Table 1 indicates that these children were all placed in

households in the lower two income brackets: 25% were placed in areas with a mean household

income of $0-35,000, 75% in areas with $35,001-70,000 mean annual household income, and

0% to any areas with higher than $70,000. Further 38% of children were moved into areas with a

higher mean annual household incomes, 25% were moved to areas with a lower mean annual

household incomes and 37% moved to areas with similar mean household income range. Thus 61% experience some sort of change in household income, although the majority of the range of change experienced was with in the $0-70,000 income bracket.

Percent Population in Poverty Findings

The analysis of removal and placement sites and poverty rates (percentage of population living in poverty) revealed that the majority of children were removed from areas with a poverty rate higher than 40%, with many of these children coming from areas with more than 80% poverty rate. Conversely, almost all of the children were placed into areas with a poverty rate between 0-20%. Thus children are likely to be taken out of areas with high rates of poverty and placed in areas with lower rates of poverty. The contrast between these findings and the income findings introduced above suggest that while children are moving within a fairly small income range, factors which effect poverty — particularly family structure indicators such as number of individuals living in households (particularly the number of dependants such as children and the elderly) — are dramatically different in the areas where children are removed from and the areas in which they are placed.
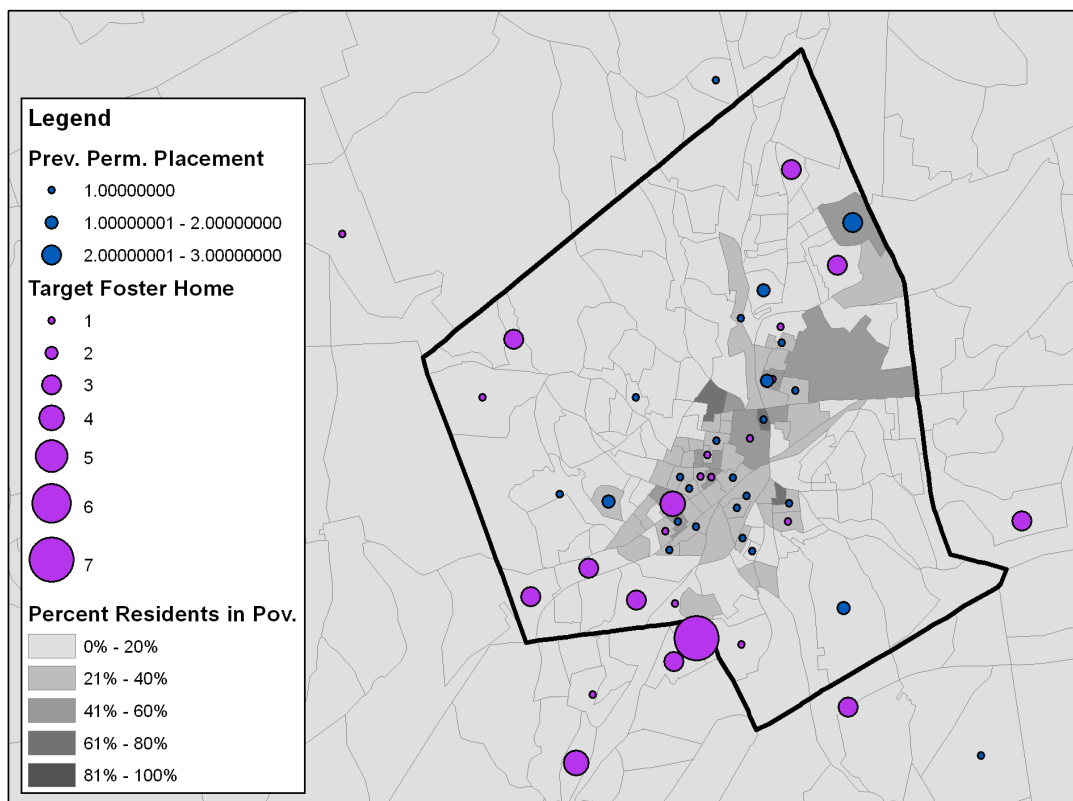
Figure 2a

Removal and Placement Locations of Children in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System and Percentage of Population in Poverty, Worcester County, MA
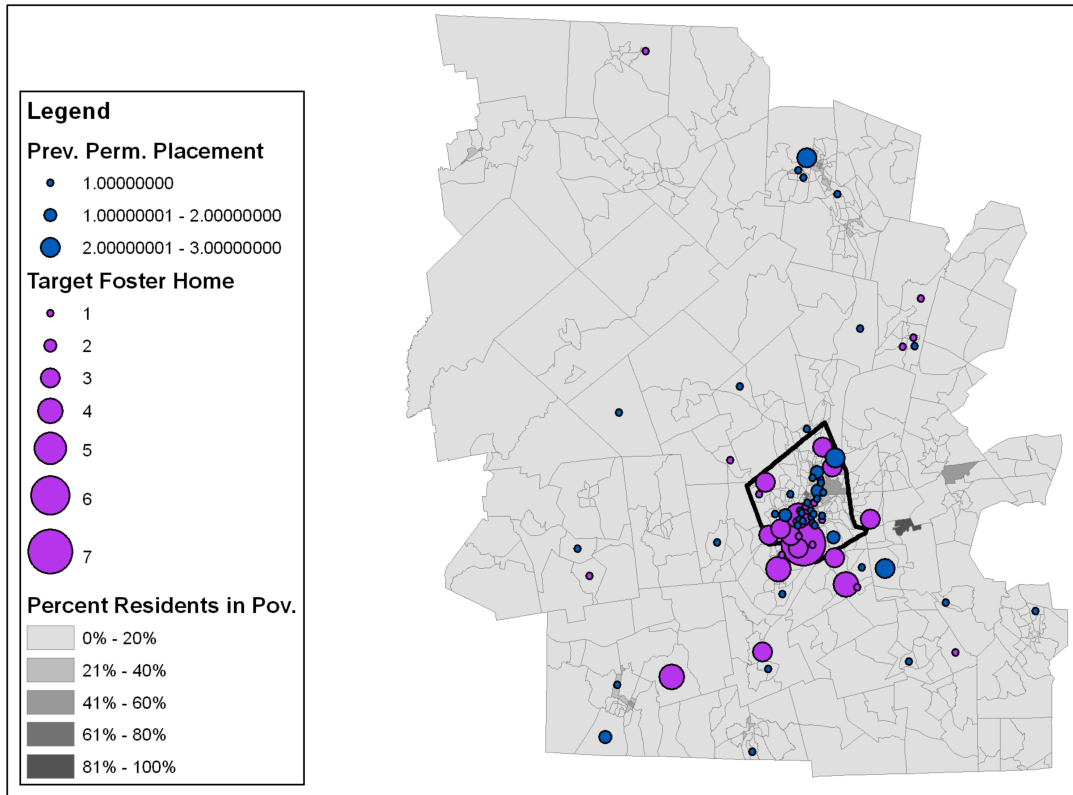
Note. Data adapted from publicly available data from The Massachusetts Geographic Information System (MassGIS) and U.S. Census data.

Figure 2b

Removal and Placement Locations of Children in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System and
Percentage of Population in Poverty, City of Worcester, MA

Note. Data adapted from publicly available data from The Massachusetts Geographic
Information System (MassGIS) and U.S. Census data.

Figures 2a and 2b display rates of removal and placement as they are related to the

poverty rate in each census block group. Figure 2a indicates that in rural and suburban areas of

Worcester County there are higher placement rates as well as lower rates of individuals

experiencing poverty. Within the city, Figure 2b shows a clustering of areas with high

populations living in poverty in inner-city urban areas that correspond to areas with higher

removal frequencies.

T**able 2**

Percentage of Population in Poverty in Areas Where Children Were Removed Compared to Areas Where They Were placed in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System

	Removal		Placement	
Pop in Poverty	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
0-20%	10	16	52	85
20-40%	4	7	4	7
40-60%	12	20	3	5
60-80%	1	18	3	0
80-100%	24	39	2	3

*Note.* N = 61. Demographic data adapted from U. S. Census Bureau Data for Worcester County MA (2000).

Table 2 indicates that of the children covered in this research the majority (77%) were removed from areas with 40% or more or the population living in poverty; 20% from areas with a poverty rate of 41-60%, 18% from areas with a poverty rate of 61- 80%, and 39% from areas with a poverty rate of 80-100%. Conversely 85% of these children were placed in areas with a poverty rate of 0-20%. Further analysis of the individual cases in this study revealed that in 7% of cases the children were moved to areas with higher poverty rates than their removal areas, 77% were moved to areas with lower poverty rates, and 16% were moved to areas with similar poverty rates. Thus 84% of the children in this study experienced a change in poverty rate between their removal and placement sites, the majority of which were from higher to lower level of poverty.

Percent Population Non-Hispanic White Findings

The analysis of race in relationship to the children's removal and placement sites within the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care system indicates that all of the children in this study were removed from homes in area with less than 40% of the population identifying as non-Hispanic white and the majority of these children were placed in homes located in area with more than 80% non-Hispanic white populations. Thus children are most likely to be removed from areas where non-Hispanic white populations are not the majority and placed into areas where they are, indicating that most children move to 'whiter' areas.
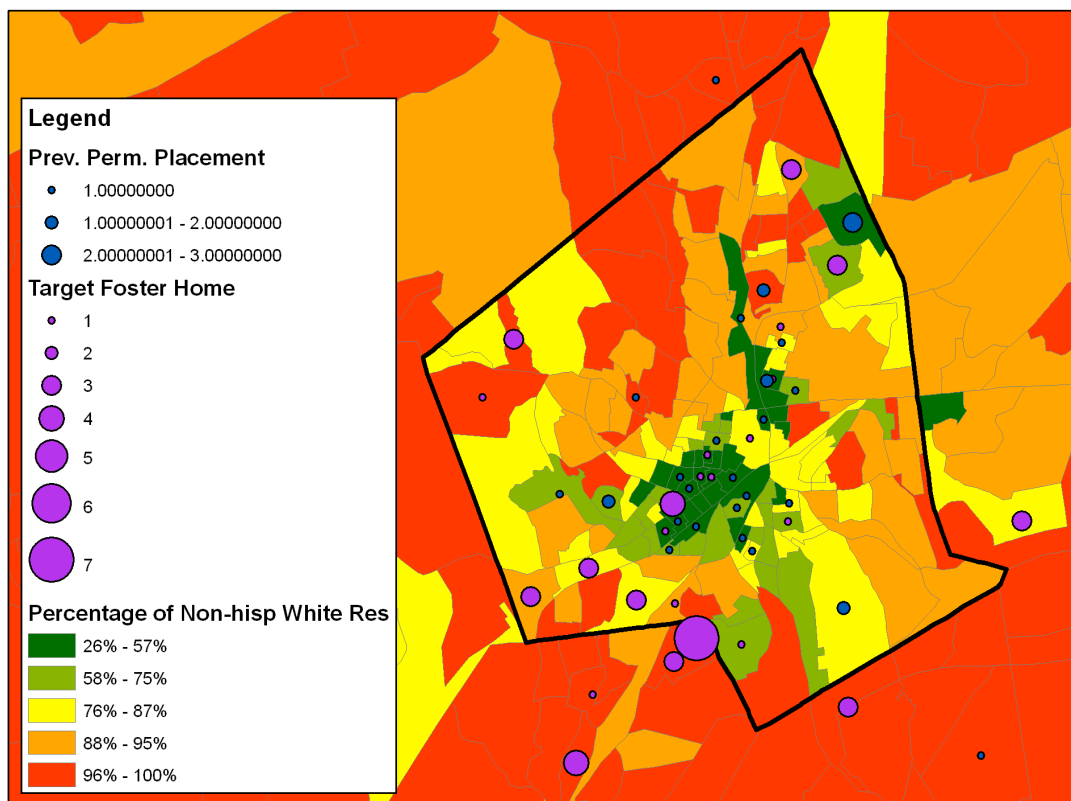
Figure 3a

Removal and Placement Locations of Children in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System and Percentage Population Non-Hispanic White, Worcester County, MA
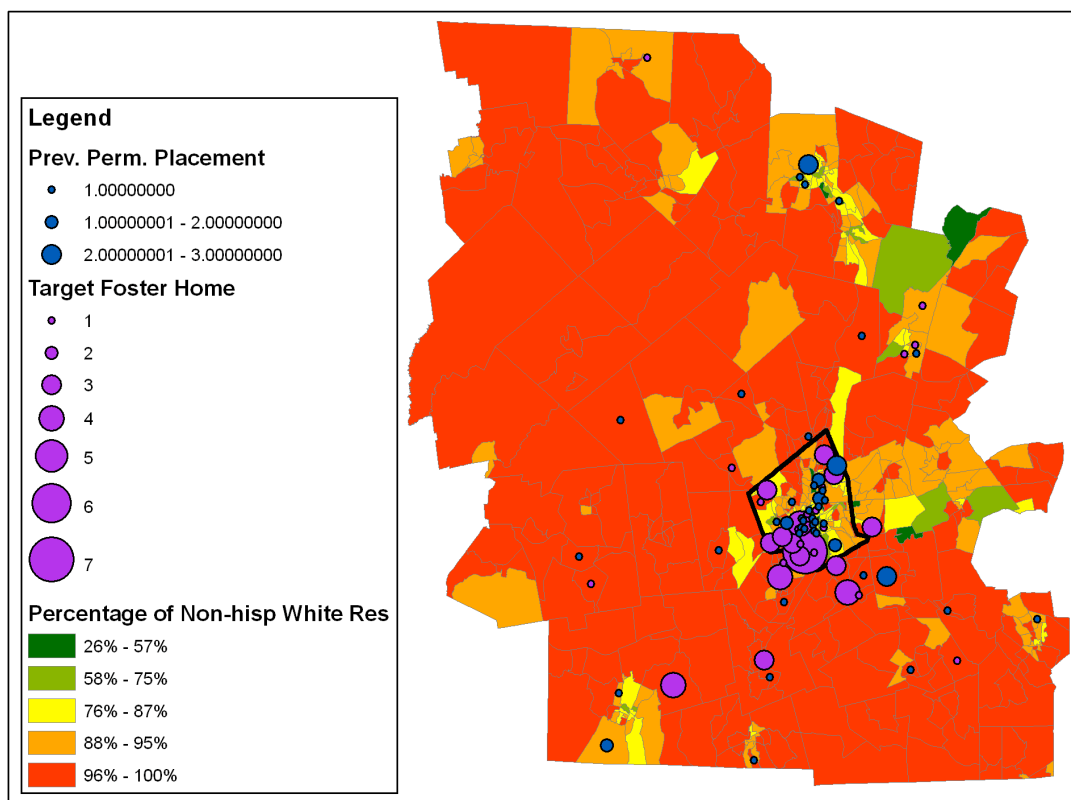
Note. Data adapted from publicly available data from The Massachusetts Geographic Information System (MassGIS) and U.S. Census data.

Figure 3b

Removal and Placement Locations of Children in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System and
ntage Population Non-Hispanic White, City of Worcester, MA

Note. Data adapted from publicly available data from The Massachusetts Geographic
nation System (MassGIS) and U.S. Census data.

Figure 3a and 3b display rates of removal and placement sites in comparison to the

percentage of population that identifies as non-Hispanic white by block group. Figure 3b

indicates that in rural and suburban areas of Worcester County there are higher placement rates

than removal rates, as well as higher percentages of non-Hispanic white populations. Within the

City of Worcester, Figure 3b shows a clustering of areas with lower populations of non-Hispanic

white people (and thus higher population of other non-white and white-Hispanic populations) in inner-city urban areas. This clustering corresponds to areas with higher removal frequencies.

Table 3

Percentage of Population Which Identifies as Non-Hispanic White in Areas Where Children Were Removed Compared to Areas Where They Were placed in the Y.O.U., Inc. Foster Care System

Non-Hispanic White	Removal		Placement	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
0-20%	35	57	2	3
20-40%	26	43	6	10
40-60%	0	0	6	10
60-80%	0	0	6	10
80-100%	0	0	41	67

Note. n = 61. Demographic data adapted from U. S. Census Bureau Data for Worcester County MA (2000).

Table 3 indicates that of the children studied in this project 57% were removed from areas with 0-20% of the population identifying as non-Hispanic white, and 43% from areas with 21-40% of the population identifying as non-Hispanic white. In contrast only 3% were placed in areas with 0-20% of the population identifying as non-Hispanic white, 10% in areas with 21-40% of the population identifying as non-Hispanic white, and 67% of the children were placed in areas with 81-100% of the population identifying as non-Hispanic white. Further analysis on each individual case indicated that 96% of the children moved to areas with a higher percentage of non-Hispanic white populations, 2% moved to areas with lower percentage of non-Hispanic white populations and 2% moved to areas with similar percents of non-Hispanic white populations. Thus 98% of the children in this study where placed in areas which had different racial compositions than the areas they were removed from. 100% of children were removed

from areas where non-Hispanic whites make up less than half of the population and more than

72% were placed in areas where non-Hispanic whites represent the majority of the population.

Discussion

This study shows that in the course of the removal and placement of youth in the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care program, individuals are likely to experience demographic changes between the areas they were removed from and those they were placed in. More specifically, the findings demonstrate that youth were more likely to be removed from relatively racially diverse areas and to be placed in areas with a racial majority of non-Hispanic white individuals. Despite relatively similar annual household incomes between placement and removal sites children were likely to be removed from places with high levels of poverty and placed in areas with low levels of poverty. This chapter will discuss the implications of these findings for understanding of the child welfare systems ability to and effectiveness in addressing issues which lead to child maltreatment as well as understanding of foster care as a component of a larger state system and thus a perpetuator of systemic issues such as race and class based oppressions. This chapter will make an argument for a more integrative and systemic approach to issues faced by individuals and families receiving foster care services and will also present areas for further research.

Most notably this project confirms the existence of multiple forms of racial disproportionality in the foster care system and further supports evidence of the links between demographics (i.e. ethnicity, race, income, social structure) and home removals presented in the literature review (Freidthler et al., 2006; Shaw et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2009; Weigensberg, 2010). This

suggests that wider systemic issues of racism and classism are being reproduced by the foster care system, through patterns of removal and placement.

The wider systemic issues of racism and economic oppression (and the manner in which these two issues coincide) are most evident in geographical analysis of poverty and race by block group. As demonstrated in literature review chapter, Worcester County is distinct demographically within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with a more diverse population in terms of race, economic status, language and culture. The geographical analysis presented in this study (Figures 1a- Figures 3b) reveals that within Worcester County, racial and cultural diversity and high levels of poverty are concentrated in the urban area around the City of Worcester and relatively absent from areas outside the city. This analysis places these county-wide demographic statistics in a more detailed spatial context, and reveals distinctly bounded geographical areas within and around the City of Worcester which are racially diverse with high poverty levels, in comparison to areas outside of the City of Worcester which have lower levels of poverty and higher levels of non-Hispanic white residents.

Within the wealthier, more racially homogenous areas, this study reveals distinctions between different neighborhoods' degree of involvement in the foster care system. The wealthiest neighborhoods are not only correlated with highest levels of non-Hispanic white residents but are also not involved in the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care system at all, either as families receiving services or families providing foster homes. These findings support existing studies that assert that demographics are strongly correlated with the level of foster care utilization in different geographical areas. This study extends these analyses by exploring the demographic transitions that youth experience as they are removed and placed within the foster care system. In Worcester County, this study further specifies differential involvement with the foster care

system, showing that low income, high poverty, highly diverse neighborhoods interact with the foster care system as sites of removal, and that middle income, low poverty and majority non-Hispanic white neighborhoods are generally sites of placement. As stated above, the wealthiest, most racially homogenous neighborhoods have little interaction with the system.

This demographic analysis demonstrates how poverty and racially diversity are co-extensive, and existing studies reveal that low income, non-white children are over-represented in the foster care system. These facts, in combination with this study's finding that removals are predominantly from low income, racially diverse neighborhoods and that most placements are in higher income, more racially homogenous neighborhoods, raise important questions for the foster care system: What are the systemic causes of home removals in low income, racially diverse neighborhoods? Are foster care programs, and state child welfare systems aware of these systemic causes, and if so do they address them? Specifically in this study, is the Department for Children and Families able to effectively make family and community level interventions which address issues of poverty-related neglect and abuse, instead of merely making immediate band-aid interventions which result in protecting individual youths but which do not address (and risk perpetuating) economic and racial oppression?

Based on the findings of this study I argue that within the foster care system there is a severe lack of consideration of the role of race and class in both the factors that lead to home removals as well as within the system which aims to protect the well being of at risk youth. Further, I argue that the lack of attention to the role of race and class in the foster care system has lead to the creation of a system that actively and silently perpetuates race and class-based oppression.

Recent trends toward specialization in the social welfare system have resulted in different agencies working to deliver different components of social services. For example, the current social welfare system in Massachusetts has separate funding and organizing agencies to address Social Security, Children and Families, Mental Health, Disabilities, and Welfare. This separation and specialization of social services, in combination with a social work profession which is increasingly pushed toward a medical model by managed care, has resulted in greater focus on the treatment of the problems of the individual and in decreased attention to the systemic issues behind the problematized individuals and families (Coffey, Olson, & Sessions, 2001; Sachs & Newdom, 1999, p. 3). In this context, the foster care system has specialized to focus on the child and is ignorant of and unable to address systemic issues. In this sense, the foster care programs are part of a broader system that perpetuates racism, poverty and economic stratification. The use of private foster care agencies such as Y.O.U., Inc. increases the segmentation of these services by splitting the responsibility for removals and placements between two separate agencies, and while the case manager's role is to oversee the child's welfare while moving within the foster care system and between agencies, this focus is often on the individual's needs and rarely addresses the wider systemic issues which may have caused the individual's removal.

I believe that these findings clearly support an argument for a more integrated and systemic approach to the issues faced by youth in the foster care system in order to avoid the reproduction and perpetuation of race and class oppression. For the individual clinician or case worker working within a foster care system which has many failures and endemic problems, focusing on the role of racism and classism might seem secondary compared to the daily struggles to achieve permanency, recruit dedicated foster families and promote family

stabilization and healthy attachment. However, the integration of a systemic approach into clinical and case work has the potential to 'foster collaborative and ethical solutions that people themselves can maintain' (Coffey et al., 2001), and is arguably necessary in order to deliver effective and ethical services:

> "both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions requires us to consider the economic and political institutions of society, and not merely the personal situations and character of a scatter of individuals." (Mills, 1961, p.9 as quoted in Sachs & Newdom, 1999, p. 20).

This ecosystemic approach, some times referred to as a 'just system of care' (Coffey et al., 2001) would necessitate a close look not just at the clinical issues and requirements for a child to be removed from their home but also at the factors which result in these requirements being met and how racism and classism may be intersecting with these clinical issues. Possible changes might include a differential response system for the Department of Children and Families to addresses issues such as poverty-related neglect, more extensive race training to focuses on systemic racism, more accessible, utilized and effective systemic interventions to address risk factors *before* requirements for removal are met and more funding to address issues affecting child welfare at the community level. Additionally, training for foster care parents as well as foster care workers that discusses best practice with regard to cultural competency and which aims to create transparency around racism and classism would begin to address the silence and ignorance around racism and classism within the welfare system. Further research could help better understand the population which child welfare systems, and specifically the foster care system, are serving, and the ways in which their needs could be better met. Such research could focus on bringing the consumer voice in the development of policy and the implementation of

services, further statistical analysis across geographical areas adjusted for population density, or in-depth studies of large child welfare agencies such as the Department of Children and Families.

The theories of place introduced in the theoretical context chapter serve to contextualize the spatial movements of youth in the foster care system as part of identity formation. The application of theories of place, and particularly the importance of the race, class and 'the home' in identity formation, highlight the ways in which spatial dislocation may be experienced by youth within the foster care system. By contextualizing this study's geographical and demographic analysis within theories of place, I argue that the foster care system could better address systemic issues through an understanding of its role in the place-based identity construction of individuals and communities. It will also raise important questions for future qualitative studies that can better explore individuals' experiences of moving between places in the foster care system.

The nature of the foster care system often necessitates the movement of children from one geographical location to another. This study indicates that these geographical movements are often between two very different places, particularly in terms of race and economic status. Postmodern and feminist perspectives emphasize the performance of multiple identities in different spaces, requiring specific skills, adaptations and abilities in order to 'perform' multiple potentially conflicting aspects of identities without fragmentation of the self. In the theoretical context chapter I used Pratt's (1998) example of working women in Worcester who through the income and social status of their husbands live (and thus construct and perform) middle class lives at home but whom engage and perform working class identities at their places of employment, not taking their middle class lives to their working class workplace. The women in this example were able to adjust to movement through different places by compartmentalizing,

separating and selectively performing aspects of gender and class identity within the daily movements of their lives.

Youth in the foster care system face similar challenges, since as this research reveals, the process of removal and placement often involves a shift between different places in which class and race norms are constructed differently. In this theoretical context, these children would need to employ similar adjustment skills to successfully transition back and forth between their locations of removal and placement. Further research into youth ability to access a fluid and mobile identity structure similar to that described Pratt, the way youth learn different appropriate identity performances for different spaces, and the effect of age and development on these processes would assist in defining the skills and protective factors needed to move back and forth between these spaces 'successfully' and without identity conflict or fragmentation. Such research could greatly assist child welfare workers, clinicians and foster families in supporting and developing these skills in foster youth.

While much previous geographic work examining place, identity and mobility has focused on transient movement through spaces of difference, the relatively permanent relocation of a child's domestic 'home place' to a new and different neighborhood raises questions not only about the individual's adaptability, but also about the placement community's adaptability to its new resident(s). Such relocations would often not be possible if it were not for the inequalities of the foster care system described in this study, since youth are often moved to places that are different demographics, cultural norms, and socio-economic and racial boundaries. As such, the relocation of a child to a very different neighborhood represents more than a spatial transition, but also the crossing of the socio-political boundaries between places. Further research into the reactions of removal and placement site communities to the breaching of these boundaries and

the way in which these reactions shape the narratives constructed by and for the youth within the foster care system would further understanding of the political effects of these movements on community race relations and the identity formation of foster care youth.

The movement of the domestic location of youth in the foster care system between bounded places with different racial and economic characteristics mirrors the crossing of similar boundaries in the early stages of desegregation. In a case study of the desegregation of Detroit, MI, Welch suggests that breaking down racially constructed place boundaries can lead to two different outcomes. It can result in a construction of place that is actively more accepting of diversity and is therefore a move toward more positive race relations. Alternatively, however, attempts to cross or dismantle such racial boundaries can result in disempowerment, fragmentation, increased tension, and it can work to protect privilege (Welch et al., 2001). The systemic desegregation that occurs through the current operation of the foster care system highlights the potential significance of these geographical transitions and boundary crossings in both the individual youth's experience of their own race and culture as well as in wider community race relations.

The displacement of youth into areas with different racial and economic characteristics may delineate a shift in the way youths participate in the constructions of narratives of race and class. For example, who is privileged and who is subjugated by constructions of 'poor,' 'white' and 'majority' or 'minority' is likely different between removal and placement neighborhoods. The movement into a place where issues such as race, class and home are constructed differently also has implications for perceptions of previous home places. For example, an economic status that was normalized under previous constructions of class may be experienced as impoverished after placement in a wealthier neighborhood. These shifting constructions of race and class do

not just change the way youth in the foster care system experience their surroundings — they will also change their affective and intellectual understandings and experiences of the self. In this sense, these changes are not just experience in the external place, but also in the internal experience of self.

The potential impact of geographical dislocation on self-identity suggests another area for future research to improve outcomes and ethical practice in the foster care system. A greater understanding of youth identity construction in foster care in the context of these geographical dislocations would enable the foster care system to make more informed policy and procedural decisions that foster positive race and class identity formation. Naming systemic and relational oppressions that are otherwise surrounded by silence and then working to understand the mechanisms through which they are hidden is clinically necessary to provide ethical services to oppressed individuals (Hays, 2007; Sachs & Newdom, 1999; D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2002). The processes of understanding and revealing hidden oppression in subjugated groups is important throughout clinical social work theory. Theories including double binding, micro aggressing or mystification address the ways in which such oppressions occur, are sustained, and can be challenged relationally (Epston & M. White, 1990; Mahmoud, 1998; D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2002). Whichever theoretical approach is used, naming these oppressions may help clinicians to provide effective and ethical practices by working to name and address the systemic issues that result in the disproportional treatment of poor non-white children and families, and the subsequent effects on the narratives and identity constructions of those individuals.

This study demonstrates that many youth were moved to areas with slightly higher or similar annual household incomes but with much lower levels of poverty. This suggests that not only do race and class differ between removal and placement sites but that the composition of the

family living within the household is also different. Specifically, this suggests that households are larger in removal neighborhoods, and that household incomes are used to support more people, particularly dependents such as children, and unemployed, disabled and elderly residents. As a result, these home places may be constructed differently in physical and social terms based on these different family compositions. Many clinicians have written of children's adaptations to new families in terms of attachment and sense of belonging but little work has focused on youth's ability to adapt to new 'kinds' of families. In a society that perpetuates, privileges and idealizes the narrative and structure of the nuclear family (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; Cowan,, Field, Hansen, Skolnick, & Swanson, 1993; Hartman & Laird, 1983; Hicks, 2005; Walsh, 2003) youth in the foster care system may be exposed not only to a society and system which inherently values the family structure of their foster family over that of the norm in the area they were removed from, but they are also limited in their access to narratives available for foster family structures (particularly narratives explaining non-kinship foster children).

Youth in the foster care system are not only required to adjust to new types of family structure, but also to different constructions of 'home' and the relationship between home and self. Home can be constructed as a site of resistance, oppression, or romanticized belonging (see Theoretical Context Chapter). For the majority of youth in the foster care system home removal is initiated due to the 'home' being experienced as a site of oppression either in the form of abuse or neglect and/or as a site of extreme conflict. However, if the home place is extended beyond the dwelling or that of the problematic relationship within the home, the home place may also have been experienced as a site of racial and class belonging as well as a site related to strength and survival in the face of familial hardships. The foster care system aims to address homes that are sites of oppression, to the extent that they pose a risk to the well being of children, by

relocating children to different home places. These 'new' homes aim to provide a corrective experience and to create a new understanding of the home. However, in this process youth may also be losing a sense of belonging in terms of race and class both at the familial and community levels. In order to understand fully the impact of children's transitions through differently constructed places further qualitative research as well as case study material is necessary to highlight how different narratives and constructions of home affect youths' sense of belonging and adjustment to transitions. This type of research could be used to create standards of best practice, and more specifically to identify factors that contribute to the co-construction of positive family systems, notions of home and sense of belonging.

Although this study focused only on the most recent move from a permanent placement in each child's case history (specifically the removal from a permanent placement into Y.O.U., Inc. foster care home), most children experience multiple removals and placements during the time in the care of the Department of Children and Families. The transition between multiple families and home places, as well as the likelihood of some moves between places that are racially and economically very different reflects the transitory nature of what Relph (1976) terms 'placelessness.' Much attention has been paid by psychological and medical disciplines to the effect of the absence of stable interpersonal attachment on children's development and ability to attach later in life (Haight W.L., Kagle J.D., & Black J.E., 2003; Klassen, 2000). However, very little work in these fields has focused on the absence of stable attachments to *places* in the development and relational styles of youth. In studies of international conflict, the term Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has been used to describe people who are forced to flee their homes but who remain within their home country's borders (Porter & Haslam, 2005). Studies of IDPs within the United States following the Hurricane Katrina disaster found that poor people

and people of color were more likely to face prejudice, hostility, and cultural insensitivity in their experience of relocation (Wilkerson, 2005 as cited in Park & Miller, 2006). Although there are many similarities between the collective experiences of foster youth and IDPs, no clinical word has been developed to emphasize the spatially dislocated nature of today's fostered youth. Placedness (being emplaced) is fundamental to our experience and construction of self. Given the importance of place in the construction of self, it is important to better understand what conceptions of self in relation to place are possible within a transitory experience such as the foster care system, and how these transitional attachments affect youths' ability to develop what Relph calls an 'authentic' relationship to place.

Conclusion

This study was born from concern regarding current racial and economic disproportionalities and disparities in the foster care system. Recent shifts away from top-down delivery of social services and a push to have consumers define their needs hold agencies and their wider system accountable for knowing and understanding the self-defined needs of consumers, and also for constructing their services and professional knowledge in response to these understandings. This study compares demographic data with the geographic movements of children in the foster care system to explore the pervasiveness of systemic oppression in foster care populations.

Based on an overview of recent analyses of the effect of poverty, race and geographical context on the utilization, success (however defined), and formation of child welfare and more specifically foster care programs this study finds that within the Y.O.U., Inc. foster care system there is a general geographical movement of children being removed from inner-city urban areas in the City of Worcester and being placed into more suburban and rural areas of Worcester County. This movement also represents a shift from more racially diverse areas to areas with majority white populations (where white is defined as non-Hispanic white) and the removal from areas with high rates of poverty and placement in areas with low rates of poverty. These findings indicate that, on aggregate, youth who enter the foster care system for placement through Y.O.U., Inc. are placed in neighborhoods with very different demographic profiles from the neighborhoods from which they were removed. These differing demographic profiles in turn

suggest that foster youth will experience a significant shift in the way socio-cultural norms regarding race and economic status are negotiated between their removal and placement neighborhoods. Based on the review of geographic theories of place conducted in the theoretical context chapter and the significance of place in the identity formation and sense of self, I argue that the socio-cultural differences which these geographic movements entail present a significant challenge for youth moving through the foster care system, requiring them to renegotiate or perform differently their self-identity, and to rethink previously held ideas about race, class and economic status.

On the basis of these findings, I argue that there is a deep need for social work research and theory to further understand the affects not only of *interpersonal* dislocation, but also of *spatial* dislocation in the foster care system. Place location is central both to individuals' experience and performance of self, as well to the construction of the self in relation to others, particularly in terms of race, class and sense of belonging. In the discussion chapter, I argue for closer attention to role played by systemic issues of racial and economic oppression in initiating the removal of children from their homes. I suggest that the foster care system perpetuates these systemic issues by focusing on the problems of individuals without producing broader strategies to address larger systemic issues that affect individual cases. In conclusion, this study demonstrates the need for the child welfare system to adopt a more self-reflective stance in the design and management of foster care programs. Programs should be conceptualized as systems that significantly influence both the collective narratives of race and class in their target communities, as well as on the identity constructions of youth within the foster care system. By better understanding the role played by the foster care system in reconstructing individual and community identities, programs can be designed to ensure that the narratives, identities and

experiences created foster positive race and class relations, and challenge dominant norms that subjugate racial minorities and low-income people, and which perpetuate the very problems which the foster care system works to correct.

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