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Kinship and Non-Kinship Foster Families in Arab and Jewish Society

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Abstract

Background

In March 2016, the Law on Foster Care was passed to secure foster children's rights and regulate the state's duties to ensure their wellbeing and care. According to Article 38 of the law, kinship foster families are to be preferred over non-kinship foster families. Although the body of knowledge on kinship foster care is expanding, there is very little empirical knowledge about the subject in Israel.

The Senior Division on Families, Children, and Youth in the Community and the Senior Division on Research, Planning and Training at the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs have contacted the research team at the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute, and Prof. Shalhevet Attar-Schwartz of the Hebrew University, seeking to narrow this research gap by examining the characteristics of kinship as opposed to non-kinship foster families in both the Jewish and Arab societies.

Objective

To compare kinship and non-kinship foster care in two population groups (Jews and Arabs) regarding the following issues: the functioning and needs characteristics of the foster families and of the 6-13-year-old children in their care; the services provided to the foster families and the degree of satisfaction of the foster caregivers with these services; and the characteristics of the birth families and the nature of their relationship with the children and foster families. This comparison is designed to provide policymakers with information that will help them develop policies, allocate resources, and improve practices for enhancing foster care arrangements across the two population groups and foster care types in order to ensure optimal outcomes for the children and families.

Method

This quantitative study used a cross-sectional survey design with data collected between July 2021 and July 2022. Structured telephone interviews were conducted with 257 foster caregivers: 163 in kinship and 94 in non-kinship foster care; 189 Jews and 68 Arabs. The interview was based on a questionnaire written by the research team, which addressed a variety of issues, mainly using valid and reliable measures from existing instruments. In addition, an online questionnaire was sent to foster care social workers regarding the same children the foster caregivers had been asked about. A total of 57 questionnaires were completed by the foster care social workers, out of 257 sent (22% response rate).

Findings

- The socioeconomic status of kinship foster families is lower than that of non-kinship foster families, and that of Arab families is lower than that of Jewish families. For example, the rate of kinship foster families whose monthly income is lower than NIS 8,500 (48.8%) is higher than their rate among non-kinship foster families (20.4%), and the rate of Arab families with such low income (74.1%) is significantly higher than in the Jewish population (24.3%).
- More Arab than Jewish children (43.3% vs. 26.6%, respectively) and more children in kinship foster care than in non-kinship foster care (43.8% vs. 8.6%, respectively) have arrived at foster care without prior intervention by the Social Services Department. More Jewish than Arab foster caregivers, and more foster caregivers in kinship than in non-kinship foster care reported child disabilities: diagnosed attention and/or concentration difficulties, developmental delay, and language delay. For example, 15% of Jewish caregivers reported language delay compared to 3.0% of Arab caregivers; and 18.5% of non-kinship caregivers reported language delay compared to 8.0% of kinship caregivers.
- More Arab than Jewish caregivers and more kinship caregivers than non-kinship caregivers reported lower health status and higher stress. For example, whereas 14.8% of Arab caregivers reported that their health was "not good", only 3.7% of Jewish caregivers did.
- More Jewish than Arab foster caregivers, and more caregivers in kinship than in non-kinship foster care reported higher informal social support. For example, 91.5% of Jewish caregivers reported relying on their spouses to a significant degree, compared to 60.9% of Arab caregivers.
- Compared to the Jewish counterparts, fewer Arab foster care families are in contact with a foster care social worker (81.0% vs. 95.2%, respectively), fewer Arab foster caregivers rely on foster care social workers for support, and in fewer Arab foster families a foster care social worker has met the child alone (48.1% compared to 53.4% in Jewish families). Compared to non-kinship foster families, in fewer kinship foster families, the foster care social worker has talked with the foster fathers (30.3% vs. 50.0%) and met the child alone in the foster home (49.3% vs. 56.5%, respectively).

Main Future Directions

- The support and assistance provided to all Arab foster families and all kinship foster families must be enhanced, since their socioeconomic status is comparatively lower, with lower health condition and higher stress among the foster caregivers.
- Additional resources need to be allocated to academic support for Arab children in foster care and children in kinship foster families, since success in primary and secondary school predicts success in the matriculation exams and future social mobility.
- Greater counseling and support need to be provided to foster caregivers and children in non-kinship foster families to facilitate meetings with the birth parents.
- It is important to ensure that all Arab foster families are regularly supported by a foster care social worker.
- Finally, we recommend steps to strengthen the relationships of foster care social workers with all Arab foster families and all kinship foster families, as well as to enable the foster care social worker to meet and talk alone with the foster children in these families.