

The Impact of Experimental Services on Dependent Children Referred for Institutional Care*

Dr Eliezer David Jaffe

This is a report of a research study concerning services to dependent children and their parents which took place in 1965 in Israel. The interest in developing an experimental programme for dependent youngsters came about because of a sense of alarm over large numbers of these children being institutionalised in recent years.¹ Consequently, a group of researchers at the Hebrew University's School of Social Work 'took over' several welfare offices for eighteen months in order to get to know the problem at first hand, to work according to the best principles we knew of in child welfare and to see whether experimental approaches made any difference in the solutions reached for the families in our care.

From December 1963 to June 1965, a demonstration study was undertaken by our research group involving clients from four public welfare offices in Israel. In each of these offices we concentrated exclusively on families where one or more children were referred for placement in an institution for dependent children. Our study included children from infancy up to age 15. We excluded any children who were organically retarded, delinquent, or severely physically handicapped. Although each of the excluded groups deserves study in its own right, we wanted to concentrate on the 'normal' youngsters who constitute the bulk of the institutionalised children in Israel.

The design for this study involved a comparison between four public welfare offices. Two of the public welfare offices (one urban, one rural) were compared

with the remaining two offices (one urban, one rural). The purpose of this dichotomy was to compare the influence of demonstration work in the experimental offices on the placement outcome of children referred for institution care with the placement outcome for children from non-demonstration agencies. The major difference between the first two offices, hereafter referred to as the experimental offices, and the two control offices was the assignment for institution placement to research social workers, i.e., graduate social workers employed by the Project or social work students supervised by a Project Supervisor, and using a more imaginative approach to case management than was common in other welfare office settings.

An example of this approach was the work with a distraught, overworked young mother asking for placement of three of her six children in an institution. She had been deserted by her husband and felt she could not cope with the task of raising her children. The research social worker, after getting to know the family situation, suggested that the welfare office purchase an electric washing machine to help the mother with the mounds of diapers which she washed daily. With this purchase and the availability of time usually spent on washing, the mother changed her mind about the placement request and kept her family together. Under 'normal' conditions and lacking a creative, perceptive worker, some of the children might well have been placed.

The two control offices, on the other hand, continued to handle their institution referrals with the same staff and in the same manner as usual with no influence on practice or policy from the experimental offices apparent. In both the experimental and control offices, case management was recorded by the workers on a monthly basis in detail and forwarded to the research headquarters.²

By means of the experimental design just described we hoped to learn whether or not differential use of welfare staff resulted in any significant differences in services rendered or affected the whereabouts of children from the experimental offices as compared to the control offices at the conclusion of the 18-month study period.

Comparability of the Experimental and Control Office Clients

Before looking at the comparative data for the experimental and control offices we tested out a basic assumption upon which the design rested. That is, that clients' problems, socio-economic background, family structure, etc. would be similar or essentially the same in both the experimental and control offices, that they were randomly distributed. If the client populations were not similar one might conclude that these dissimilarities were influencing any differences found between the two types of offices rather than the type of service or style of welfare practice which differed by definition.

In brief, the clients in the experimental and control offices were found to be extremely alike on most of the social background variables studied and there was very little evidence that they constituted two basically different populations.³

Considering the basic similarity of the control and experimental welfare office clients, we present findings concerning the services provided and the placement outcomes for the children referred for institutional placement in the two types of settings. In regard to the latter, the most important finding relates to the whereabouts of the children at the end of the 18-month study period. A comparison of the total number of children referred to the experimental settings (175 children) with the total

number referred to the control settings (185 children) showed a significantly* larger proportion of controls located in institutions. Conversely, there was a higher proportion of experimentals than controls located in 'substitute home' or 'own home' settings.⁴ At the close of the study period 60.8 per cent of the children located in institutions were from the control group, while 39.2 per cent of the children in this setting were from the experimental offices. Of all the children in substitute or own home settings 47.9 per cent were from the control offices and 52.1 per cent from the experimental offices. It is also interesting to note that these differences showed only a trend towards significance when we looked only at the whereabouts of the oldest children referred in the experimental and control groups; it became significant, however, when the whereabouts for all of the 360 children referred were taken into account.

Given the similarity of the control and experimental groups, one wonders what made the differences regarding placement outcome for these groups. The answer may well be found in an analysis of the kinds of services rendered and the 'service-delivery systems' of the control and experimental offices.

Under the broad category of 'service rendered', a study of the cases showed no significant differences between the experimental and control groups regarding the following variables: intervention strategy used (i.e., ameliorative vs. preventive), the term of planning required for the child, the degree of pressure on the family or the worker to place, degree of agency activity prior to placement of a child, or the availability of a vacancy in the institution.

Family Focus in Experimental Settings

The experimental settings did differ significantly from the controls, however, on a wide range of important variables. Workers in the demonstration settings were more family-focused than child-focused in their approach to problems.

Experimental office social workers de-emphasised institutional care as a place-

*'Significant' findings are those where chance occurrences are limited to .05 and less.

ment goal (this was the goal for 27.3 per cent of the experimental children) and accented foster care (23.3 per cent), kibbutz placement (8.1 per cent) and placement with relatives, remain in or return to own home (41.4 per cent). The percentages for the same categories of goals for the control offices were 63.2 per cent institution placement, 13.2 per cent foster care, 5.7 per cent kibbutz, and 17.9 per cent relatives and own-home—these differences are significant.

The primary service to the family also differentiated the two groups. Experimental offices concentrated first on personal counselling, income maintenance, and home care services, while control offices concentrated much less on personal counselling, slightly more on providing material needs, and very heavily on planning around institutional placement. When we looked at the two groups with regard to the three primary services extended to the family the same differences appeared.

Intensive contacts between the agency and the family were significantly more frequent for the experimental group than for the controls; approximately 73.1 per cent of the control families were seen less than once a month as compared to 26.9 per cent for the controls. The period of service to the family or the child was significantly longer for the experimental group clients; 76.5 per cent were in service for a year or more as compared to 23.5 per cent for the controls. Degree of agency activity (as seen by a number of agency-child-family contacts) before and after placement of a child tended to be more intensive for the experimental agencies, and consistently less intensive for the control agencies. The 'problem-solving creativeness' of social workers was rated ('blind'—without knowing which were the experimental and which the control offices) as being higher for the experimental offices.⁵

More Placement Changes in Control Group

Children placed away from their own homes in the control settings experienced significantly more additional subsequent placements during the research period (to

settings other than 'own home') than did children placed from experimental offices. Of all the children who were moved to a second home, 77.3 per cent of these were from the control group. In other words, placements from the control offices tended to be serial, while placements from experimental offices seemed to be more stable.

Finally, we want to comment briefly on data related to the role of local agency and inter-agency structure as an enabling device. The reviewers of the case records rated the administrative structure of the control offices as facilitating social workers' treatment goals more adequately than did the agency structure of the experimental offices. This may well be due to the fact that the public welfare structure is predominantly geared towards rather stereotyped categories of services, such as institution placement or categorical aid, so that some of the innovative or *ad hoc* social services introduced in the experimental offices tended to produce some friction with the existing bureaucratic structure. This hypothesis seems to be supported by an additional finding which showed that inter-agency co-operation played a significantly less important role in the control offices than it did in the experimental offices. In other words, innovative work in the experimental offices required effectively drawing on cooperation from numerous agencies outside of the local welfare office in order to 'tailor-make' treatment programmes; in such cases the role of other agencies becomes important in executing a service.

Summary

Two local public welfare offices in Israel were operated for a period of 18 months by a University guided team of social workers to test the effects of innovative work on the rates of institutional placements for dependent children. A comparison of placement outcomes was made between cases from the two experimental welfare offices (N=175 children) and two control offices (N=185 children) where services proceeded as usual. Results at the close of the study period showed a significant drop in institutional placements in the experimental offices and a striking increase in foster home and

own-home placements. Causes of these differences were traced to such factors as family vs. child focused treatment in the experimental agencies, an emphasis on counselling vs. giving of material services as the initial planning step, intensity of contacts between the agency and the family, creativity of the social worker, and efforts to 'tailor-make' services in accordance with specific needs of families served.

The fact that such factors as accent on family vs. child care and on tailoring services to the needs of families vs. forcing families to fit existing services influence rates of institutionalisation has many implications for welfare policy. One would expect as a basic tenet of the profession that services must fit clients' needs and not the opposite. It also seems quite basic to social work prac-

tice, for example, that contact with families be consistent, that post-placement follow-up is essential, and that personal counselling be a cornerstone of work with families in crisis. The fact that neglect of these basic elements of welfare practice leads to a higher rate of institutionalisation is an important scientific finding **regardless** of whether one believes institutional care to be 'good' or 'bad' for children. But equally important for the social work profession is the disquieting fact that many of the 'standard' procedures of the local welfare offices studied in this research are not in keeping with practices considered basic to the profession. If this is true generally, then there seems a need to consider changes either in the avowed tenets of practice, or to bring present practices up to basic standards.

*This study was supported by a grant from the Welfare Administration, US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and by the Child Welfare Division of the Israel Ministry of Social Welfare. Our appreciation is acknowledged to the Holon, Beersheba, Petach Tikva, and Lydda welfare offices, which co-operated in the study.

REFERENCES

- 1 Israel Ministry of Social Welfare. **Children Placed Out of Their Own Homes, 1963-1964 and 1964-1965**. Jerusalem (April 1966), p 9 (in Hebrew). See also 'Substitutes for Family: on the Development of Institutional Care for Dependent Children in Israel' by E. D. Jaffe in the **Journal of Jewish Communal Service** (winter 1967), pp 129-143.
- 2 A detailed description of recording procedures for both the experimental and control offices can be found in: Eliezer D. Jaffe and Gertrude Rosner, **Care of Dependent Children in Israel**, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel, 1967, pp 180-181.
- 3 **Ibid**, p 204.
- 4 'Substitute home' settings included foster homes, relatives' homes, and foster homes in kibbutzim (families of communal settlements).
- 5 Case records in the experimental and control offices were reviewed by a panel of three 'coders' of raters, each of whom had a background in social work or psychology. The raters had no prior contact with the research design or the purpose of the study. They rated 74 variables studied on the basis of information found in the case records. They disagreed between themselves only 9.1 per cent of the time during their final training period.