



Who will go back home? Factors associated with decisions to address family reunification from residential care



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ABSTRACT

One of the goals that can be addressed when a youngster enters residential care (RC) is family reunification, but this is not possible or recommended in all cases. The objective of this work is to determine the factors associated with deciding to address family reunification from RC. The sample consists of 281 youngsters aged 6 to 18, of whom 27.8% had a family reunification plan. The information was extracted from the administrative files, through the “Sistema de Evaluación y Registro en Acogimiento Residencial” (SERAR [Evaluation and Register System in Residential Care]; Del Valle & Bravo, 2007). Logistic regressions were conducted, which showed that some variables, such as instability during RC, the presence of physical neglect, having entered the child protection system at age 15 years or older, and very long stays, decrease the likelihood of addressing family reunification. On the other hand, parents’ incapacity to exercise parental control as one of the reasons for separation increases the likelihood of addressing family reunification. Some family variables are also related to the likelihood of addressing reunification. These results are discussed in relation to the scientific literature, due to the existence of differences between countries in decision-making in child welfare. There is a need to work on some factors preventively to prevent youngsters from entering RC.

1. Introduction

Child protection system professionals must often make decisions that have a huge impact on the lives of youngsters and their families. These decisions must often be made in a situation of uncertainty, and the benefits and damages of the measures taken both for the child and the family must be carefully balanced (Hébert, Esposito, & Hélie, 2018; Munro, 2019). As the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the family as the ideal context for children's growth and well-being, a decision that professionals must routinely face is whether or not to reunite youngsters with their biological family after being separated from it. Research has shown that the organizational culture and attitudes of the professionals influence their decision-making, which can become a subjective and potentially biased process (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Gillingham, 2019; Munro, 2019; Taylor, 2010), and there are also great differences between countries when making decisions about child protection (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Carlson, Hutton, Priest, & Melia, in press).

The objective of this study is to deepen our knowledge of the factors that determine addressing family reunification in some cases that are in RC, and not in others. In addition, given the great differences observed

between countries, and even between different regions within the same country (Carlson et al., in press), this study will provide information from a specific context such as the Spanish one.

1.1. Reunification after out of home placement

Although the circumstances that led to the adoption of out of home placement have been overcome, reunification is a complex process due to many factors, and in some cases, it can be even counterproductive. Thus, sometimes, remaining in RC is more advisable and beneficial for youngsters than a forced reunification that may end up failing, especially when one of the reasons that led to the adoption of a protective measure was negligence (Biehal, Sinclair, & Wade, 2015; Carvalho, Delgado, Pinto, & Benbenishty, 2018; Hébert et al., 2018). It seems necessary to carefully analyze the variables that facilitate or hinder the success of reunification processes, to avoid failures and young people's having to re-enter RC, which is more frequent than desirable. Studies that have followed up reunifications find re-entry rates in the protection system ranging from 47% to 65% (Carlson et al., in press; Lutmar & Farmer, 2013).

Research in this field has indicated some variables that appear to be

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related to the success or failure of family reunification processes. These include the child's age, the existence of emotional and behavioral problems, stability during the stay in the protection system, the existence of negligence, the problems manifested by the parents, or their degree of cooperation and contact with the families or centers that take in their children (Carnochan, Lee, & Austin, 2013; Farmer & Wijedasa, 2013; Frimpong-Manso & Bugyei, 2019; Lee, Hwang, Socha, Pau, & Shaw, 2013; Lee, Shaw, Gove, & Hwang, 2010; López, Del Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2013; López-Larrosa et al. (2019), Observatorio de la Infancia, 2018; Vanderfaillie, Van Holen, De Mayer, Belenger, & Gypen, 2017; Wittenstrom, Baumann, Fluke, Graham, & James, 2015). With regard to cooperation and contact with the families, the complexity of family reunification processes requires addressing them from a cooperative model in which families and children play an active role, both during its preparation and in the follow-up after reunification (Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, Vaquero, & Urrea, 2015; Balsells, Urrea, Ponce, Vaquero, & Navajas, 2019; Huefner, 2018; Inchaurredo, Fuentes-Peláez, Pastor, & Mundet, 2018; Lee et al., 2013; Maltais, Cyr, Parent, & Pascuzzo, 2019; Martín, Torbay, & Rodríguez, 2008).

1.2. RC in Spain

According to official statistics, in Spain, there are 47,493 children and adolescents with a family separation protective measure, of whom 37% are in RC (Observatorio de la Infancia [Children's Observatory], 2018), and Spain is one of the countries with a more extensive use of RC as a protective measure. Although efforts have been made in recent years to enhance foster care, Spain is still far from countries where this is the predominant alternative (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013). However, this development of foster care on the one hand, and the promotion of family preservation programs to avoid separation on the other, as set out in the legislation (Law 26/2015 of July 28, amending the protection system for infancy and adolescence) have turned RC into a specialized resource to attend to certain profiles. Thus, currently, most of the youngsters attended to in these resources are adolescents, with almost 60% being older than 15 (Children's Observatory, 2018), and it is also a population at high risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems (González-García et al., 2017).

As in other countries (Huefner, 2018), in Spain, quality standards for RC have also been published (Del Valle, Bravo, Martínez, & Santos, 2012), and this document states that all youngsters entering RC must have a final goal, called a case plan, which must be one of three alternatives: family reunification, definitive separation with placement in another family (foster family or adoption), or emancipation and transition to adult life for cases where the first two were not possible or recommended. In Spain, it is very difficult to access reliable statistics on aspects such as the number of cases in which family reunification is addressed, or the failure rate of the reunifications carried out (Balsells et al., 2015; López et al., 2013). This lack of data is mainly due to the fact that child protection competences are transferred to the 17 autonomous communities, each one collecting the information differently, with no unified registration.

1.3. The present study

In the Spanish context, only one study has analyzed the factors associated with family reunification, but from foster families, not from RC (López et al., 2013). As there are large differences between countries when making decisions on child protection (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Carlson et al., in press), and also in what is meant by RC (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013; Whittaker et al., 2016), this study aims to understand the variables that are associated with decisions to address family reunification from RC in Spain. For this purpose, we will analyze the weight of the different factors in the decision to address possible reunification.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample is composed of the 281 youngsters between 6 and 18 years old (54.1% boys and 45.9% girls) who were in RC on the island of Tenerife (Canary Islands), and who had an established case plan at the time of data collection. Mean age was 14.5 years ($SD = 3$). 37% of this sample has had one or two case plan changes during the time they have been in RC. A family reunification case plan was addressed in 78 cases (27.8%) at the time of data collection. This study did not include unaccompanied foreign youngsters because family reunification is an extraordinarily common objective in this group.

2.2. Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was the "Sistema de Evaluación y Registro en Acogimiento Residencial" (SERAR [Evaluation and Registration System of Residential Care]; Del Valle & Bravo, 2007). This instrument consists of three distinct parts: a cumulative register, the individualized educational project (IEP), and the follow-up report. Only the first part of SERAR was used for this study, in which all the case data are collected. The use of this instrument has been established in different autonomous communities and it has been recommended by the special committee of the Senate for the study of the problems of national adoption and other related issues, because it provides each child with an individualized assessment, an intervention project, and a case plan protocol.

2.3. Procedure

The files were accessed through a signed collaboration agreement between the university and the administration responsible for RC. The information obtained was downloaded to an ad hoc information collection protocol based on the review of other investigations in this field (González-García et al., 2017; Martín, González-García, Del Valle, & Bravo, 2018). This protocol collected all the data related to the characteristics of the case, including the established case plan, the family variables, and the youngster's variables. Once all the information was collected, statistical analyses were carried out with the SPSS program version 21. This study design was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of La Laguna.

2.4. Data analysis

First, bivariate analyses were performed using the chi square statistic (χ^2) and the corrected standardized residuals to determine which case, family, and personal variables were related to the family reunification case plan. The confidence interval used for corrected standardized residuals was 0.95, so values greater than 1.95 and less than -1.95 were considered significant. Subsequently, logistic regressions were carried out, including in the models only the variables in which significant differences were found in the bivariate analyses, to determine their predictive capacity on the decision-making of addressing possible family reunification.

3. Results

3.1. Case variables

Table 1 presents the comparative analyses in the case variables between the youngsters with whom reunification was addressed and those with whom it was not. No differences were observed as a function of the youngsters' gender or age at the time of data collection, but there were differences as a function of the age at which they entered RC. The percentage of children who were placed in RC under the age of 6 and

Table 1
Contingency tables with case profile variables.

	Family Reunification (%)	NO Family Reunification (%)
Sex		
Boys	59	52.2
Girls	41	47.8
Current age		
6–10	12.8	10.3
11–14	19.2	25.6
15–18	67.9	64
Age at entry**		
0–6	2.6	19.2 ⁺
7–10	17.9	21.2
11–14	33.3	29.6
15–18	46.2 ⁺	30 ⁻
Reason for entry		
Abuse**	71.8 ⁻	88.1 ⁺
Impossible to comply with parental obligation	14.1	16.3
Abandonment or relinquishment	23.1	22.8
Parental Control Incapacity***	39.7 ⁺	15.8 ⁻
Violence against parents***	6.4 ⁺	0 ⁻
Stay at RC***		
< 1 year	53.8 ⁺	22.2 ⁻
1–3 years	39.7	31
3–5 years	3.8 ⁻	17.2 ⁺
> 3–5 years	2.6 ⁻	29.6 ⁺
Case Plan Changes***	11.5 ⁻	46.8 ⁺
Re-entry***	5.1 ⁻	24.6 ⁺
Type of abuse		
Physical abuse	25.6	25.7
Physical negligence***	33.3 ⁻	69.8 ⁺
Emotional abuse	34.6	44.1
Emotional neglect**	48.7 ⁻	65.8 ⁺
Sexual abuse	1.3	0.5

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001; ⁺ Corrected standardized residual > 1.96; ⁻ Corrected standardized residual < -1.96.

who have a family reunification case plan is significantly lower than the percentage of those with other case plans. The opposite is true for those who enter RC when they are over 15 years of age, who are more likely to be assigned a family reunification case plan. With respect to the reason for entry, cases of victims of abuse seem to be significantly less likely to be assigned to a family reunification plan, especially, when the abuse was physical or emotional neglect. Another variable in which differences were found is the time of stay in RC, as the percentage of youngsters who had been less than a year was higher in the group with a reunification case plan, whereas it was lower among those who had been in RC for more than three years. It was also found that having a change in the case plan or having suffered re-entry into RC was significantly less common among young people with a family reunification plan.

Logistic regression was subsequently performed, using only the case variables in which significant differences were found (see Table 2). We obtained a significant function, $\chi^2(11) = 104.19, p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.45$, which correctly classified 80% of the cases. Analysis of the odds ratio indicated that when one of the reasons for entry into RC is parents' incapacity to exercise parental control, the likelihood of establishing a family reunification plan is almost threefold. In contrast, having entered RC over the age of 15, being the victim of physical negligence, having been in RC for more than three years, having experienced changes in the case plan, or having re-entered RC decreased the chances of addressing family reunification.

3.2. Family variables

The comparative analyses with family variables are presented in Table 3. With regard to the fathers' problems, the results indicated that

Table 2
Logistic regression with case profile variables.

Variables	OR	95% CI
Age of entry		
0–6 years	0.24	[0.04, 1.35]
15–18 years	0.27 **	[0.12, 0.61]
Abuse	1.73	[0.64, 4.72]
Physical negligence	0.4 *	[0.18, 0.89]
Emotional neglect	0.55	[0.24, 1.24]
Parental control incapacity	2.76 *	[1.24, 6.14]
Stay at RC		
< 1 year	1.44	[0.69, 3.02]
3–5 years	0.17 *	[0.04, 0.68]
> 5 years	0.13 *	[0.03, 0.65]
Case Plan Changes	0.3 *	[0.12, 0.78]
Re-entry	0.09 ***	[0.03, 0.28]

OR = odds ratio, **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 3
Contingency tables with family variables.

	Family Reunification (%)	NO Family Reunification (%)
Father's problem		
Deceased	4	9.6
Absent or uninvolved	33.3	28.3
Delinquency	11.1	16.6
Prison	10	14.5
Partner violence	38.3 ⁻	53.9 ⁺
Alcoholism*	16.7 ⁻	33.8 ⁺
Drug Dependencies**	15 ⁻	33.1 ⁺
Mental Health	11.7	7.9
Disability (physical or intellectual)	6.7	9.2
Chronic disease	3.3	11.8
Economic problems*	8.3 ⁻	22.5 ⁺
None***	23.3 ⁺	2.6 ⁻
Mother's problems		
Deceased	2.6	4.9
Absent or uninvolved**	1.3 ⁻	11.6 ⁺
Delinquency	3.9	8.4
Prison (present or past)*	13.2 ⁺	4.7 ⁻
Prostitution (present or past)	3.9	7.9
Victim of partner violence	48.7	53.9
Alcoholism	13.2	21.6
Drug Dependencies	13.2	18.3
Mental Health	13.2	19.4
Disability (physical, intellectual or sensory)	13.2	19.4
Chronic disease	9.1	11.6
Economic problems*	27.6	41.9 ⁺
None**	19.7 ⁺	6.3
Parent Couple Situation**		
Marriage/stable partner	28.6 ⁺	13.9
Separation/divorce	61	58.9
Widowhood	3.9	9.9
Single	5.2	5.4
Contact with the family of origin		
No contact	1.3	7
Home visits	35.5	43.3
Visits without overnight-stay	34.2	26.4
Overnight-stays	21.1	21.4
Supervised visits	61.1	55.9
Siblings in RC*	30.8 ⁻	46.3 ⁺

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001; ⁺ Corrected standardized residual > 1.96; ⁻ Corrected standardized residual < -1.96.

the percentage of cases that had fathers with problems of alcoholism, drug dependence, or economic problems was significantly lower in the group in which reunification was addressed, and the percentage of cases whose fathers did not exhibit any problems was significantly higher in this group. With regard to the mothers' problems, the percentage of cases in which the mother was absent or uninvolved or had

Table 4
Logistic regression with family variables.

Variables	OR	95% CI
Father's alcoholism	0.59	[0.24, 1.44]
Father's drug dependencies	0.4	[0.18, 1]
Father's financial problems	0.38	[0.11, 1.35]
No father's problems	7.95 *	[1.53, 41.35]
Absent mother	0.08 *	[0.01, 0.97]
Mother's prison	8.73 *	[1.67, 45.69]
Mother's economic problems	0.98	[0.4, 2.43]
No mother's problems	0.71	[0.15, 3.24]
Marriage/stable partner	1.05	[0.41, 2.7]
Siblings at home	0.55	[0.24, 1.24]

OR = odds ratio, * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

financial problems was significantly lower in the group with a reunification plan, whereas if the mother was in prison or had no problems, the percentage of youngsters with a reunification plan was significantly higher than in the rest. With regard to the couple situation, the group with a family reunification plan had a significantly higher percentage of married parents or parents who were in a stable relationship. No significant differences were found depending on parental contact with the youngsters. Finally, the percentage of cases that had siblings in RC was significantly lower in the youngsters with a family reunification plan.

As with the case variables, logistic regression was performed using only the variables in which significant differences were found (see Table 4). We obtained a significant function, $\chi^2(10) = 50.55$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.33$, which correctly classified 77.5% of the cases. Analysis of the odds ratio indicated that if the father had no problems, the probability of addressing family reunification was almost eightfold. If the mother was in prison, this probability was almost ninefold. However, if the mother was absent or uninvolved, the likelihood of addressing a reunification case plan decreased.

3.3. Personal variables of the youngsters

Comparative analyses of the youngsters' variables found significant differences in three variables (see Table 5). Specifically, the percentage of cases that used tobacco, consumed other illegal toxic substances, or was fulfilling or had fulfilled any judicial action was significantly higher in the group of youngsters with a family reunification plan.

As in the previous cases, logistic regression was performed with these variables (see Table 6). Although a significant function was obtained, $\chi^2(11) = 104.19$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.45$, which

Table 5
Contingency tables with personal variables.

	Family Reunification (%)	NO Family Reunification (%)
Child disability		
Intellectual	9	9.9
Physical	3.8	1.5
Sensory	1.3	1.5
Chronic disease	10.4	15.8
Current psychological care	50	46.3
Current psychiatric care	32.1	25.6
Current psychopharmacological medication	28.2	18.2
Psychological diagnosis	37.2	23.2
Suicidal behaviors (present or past)	10.3	4.4
Tobacco use*	44.2 ⁺	30.3 ⁻
Consumption of illegal toxic substances**	44.2 ⁺	27.9 ⁻
Judicial measure*	20.5 ⁺	9.4 ⁻

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$; ⁺ Corrected standardized residual > 1.96 ; ⁻ Corrected standardized residual < -1.96 .

Table 6
Logistic regression with personal variables.

Variables	OR	95% CI
Tobacco use	1.15	[0.52, 2.59]
Consumption of illegal toxic substances	1.53	[0.66–3.55]
Has or has had judicial measure	1.86	[0.84, 4.14]

OR = odds ratio, * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

correctly classified 80% of the cases, no odds ratio value was significant.

4. Discussion

Family reunification is one of the priority objectives addressed with young people who have been separated from their families as a protective measure, although it is not feasible or advisable in all cases. The aim of this work was to determine the variables associated with the decision to address family reunification of youngsters in RC. As far as the case variables are concerned, most of our results are along the lines of the results found in the scientific literature. Thus, we found that the variables that decrease the likelihood of addressing family reunification are having entered RC at age 15 or older, having been in RC for more than 3 years, having had changes in the case plan or re-entry into RC, or when physical negligence was among the reasons for the decision to separate the youngster from the family.

An older age of entry into the protection system has already been identified as a factor that hinders reunification (Lee et al., 2010; López et al., 2013). Possibly, when the decision is made to separate an adolescent from the family, it is because coexistence has already become harmful due to the existence of complex problems that are difficult to address in the time remaining before the youngster comes of age. Therefore, the choice is made to prepare the adolescent for the process of emancipation and transition to adult life.

Overly long stays in RC also decrease the likelihood of addressing family reunification. It seems logical to think that three years is more than enough time to have addressed the reasons for the separation. Stays in RC seem to achieve the goals set in one to three years (Martín, Rodríguez, & Torbay, 2007), so if the stay is too long, it is because reunification is not feasible. Likewise, overly short stays also discourage reunification, as there has not been enough time for the family and the youngster to assume the situation or to change the causes that led to the separation (Hébert et al., 2018).

Instability during RC, with changes in the case plan and exits and entries into the protection system is a variable that makes it difficult to address reunification (Lee et al., 2010; López et al., 2013). It seems clear that some stability is needed in order to be able to work properly, and because case plan changes and re-entry into the protection system can be indicators that the objectives could not be achieved.

Another case variable that decreases the likelihood of addressing family reunification, a fact already revealed by the scientific literature (Biehal et al., 2015; Carvalho et al., 2018; López et al., 2013), is that the youngster has been the victim of physical negligence. Some authors have warned that the family reunification of these youngsters has a high risk of failure, or of causing harm in youngsters who remain with their families after being reunited (Biehal et al., 2015), so it should be carefully assessed.

The only case variable that increases the likelihood of addressing family reunification is when one of the reasons for the separation includes parents' incapacity to exercise parental control. Underlying this reason may be the existence of an inadequate educational style in the parents, which is something that can be worked on, so a future reunification is feasible. But the youngsters may also have an emotional or behavioral problem that requires specialized intervention. In Spain, half of the youngsters in RC receive specialized treatment because of

these problems that is provided by psychologist or psychiatrist, and in most cases, parents' incapacity to exercise parental control is among the reasons for separation (González-García et al., 2017). In addition, in the most severe cases, treatments are usually intensive, one or two years maximum (Del Valle, Sainero, & Bravo, 2015), which is a reasonable time to address reunification. Although it may seem contradictory to reports in the scientific literature, which indicate that youngsters' emotional and behavioral problems and their receiving medical treatment hinder the process of family reunification (Carnochan et al., 2013; Farmer & Wijedasa, 2013; Lee et al., 2010; López et al., 2013; Vanderfaillie, Van Holen, De Mayer, Belenger, & Gypen, 2017; Wittenstrom et al., 2015), there may be various explanations. One of them may be methodological in nature, as most of these studies focused on already reunified cases and, in our study, we examined the proposed case plan, which does not necessarily have to end with a reunification. Another explanation may derive from the fact that all these studies were conducted in different countries, so the context may determine different ways of acting (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Carlson et al., in press). And a last explanation could be related to the figure of voluntary guardianship contained in Spanish legislation (Law 26/2015 of July 28, modification of the System of Protection for Children and Adolescents). This mentions various reasons for parents to request the public administration's help in caring for their children, through RC or a foster family. One of these reasons may be the lack of skills needed to educate the children when they have a mental health problem, which in Spain, is more than half of the population attended to in RC (González-García et al., 2017). Volunteer guardianship is limited to a maximum of two years, with the commitment of the parents to undergo intervention if necessary, and with the aim of returning the youngster to the family home.

As far as family variables are concerned, our results indicate that when the mother is absent or uninvolved in the process, the chances of addressing reunification are lower, whereas if the parents have no relevant problems, the odds increase. This result is logical, and the existence of differentiated results for mothers and fathers may be due to the idiosyncrasies of Spain—as a Mediterranean country—, which assigns a fundamental role to the biological family in the protection system, where mothers play the leading role in caring for children and the presence of the father is a fundamental support in parenting (Del Valle, Canali, Bravo, & Vecchiato, 2013). Another variable that increases the likelihood of reunification is the mother's incarceration. Serving time for less serious crimes is another reason allowing families to apply for voluntary guardianship, already mentioned above, which would explain this result.

Finally, no youngsters' personal variables that could predict family reunification were found. This may be because the variables in the files are rough data and make it impossible to discriminate appropriately. Thus, having a psychological diagnosis would include a broad and varied casuistic ranging from an eating disorder to a behavioral disorder, not to mention a neuro-developmental disorder.

4.1. Limitations

There are two main limitations in this study. The first refers to the fact that we examined the proposed case plan, not whether or not reunification finally occurred, as changes to the case plan may occur due to the instability of the families and the youngsters themselves. This fact obliges us to be cautious when comparing our results with those of other research. The second limitation refers to the fact that the information was collected from the administrative files, so that some variables, such as those related to the youngsters, are not included in detail, and are biased or confusing.

5. Conclusions

This study has analyzed the factors associated with family

reunification of cases in RC. The results found are consistent with those presented in other works, and indicate that aspects such as instability in RC and an extended stay in RC hinder the processes of family reunification, as well as when the youngster enters RC at an advanced age or has been the victim of physical negligence. With regard to the last variable, as research has been indicating the problem and its consequences in the youngster (Biehal et al., 2015), as well as the difficulties it generates for a reunification with guarantees, it would be advisable to deepen our knowledge of how the presence of physical neglect is being addressed, from the time it is detected until the child enters RC—from which, as we have seen, it is difficult to return to the family. This is recommended more in countries like Spain, which are reluctant to reunify after a protective measure of family separation has been adopted (Benbenishty et al., 2015).

Another conclusion of this work refers to the fact that parents' incapacity to exercise parental control as a source of separation appears to facilitate future reunification. And this is because it seems a relatively easy obstacle to revoke through training in parental skills, which should lead us to deal with this problem well in advance through family preservation programs, to avoid separations that are most often traumatic.

In short, it seems necessary to redouble efforts in preventive actions that prevent having to take family separation measures, leaving this alternative for cases requiring specialized intervention that cannot be provided from the family context (Del Valle et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2016).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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