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Linking state child care and child welfare policies and populations: Implications for children, families, and policymakers

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ABSTRACT

Policymakers have begun to explore new areas of service system integration, including coordination of services for vulnerable children and families. Early care and education (ECE) research has also begun to pursue more nuanced questions about the role of ECE in the development of vulnerable children, including those involved with child welfare. Yet, to date, very little is understood about the integration of ECE and child welfare service systems or policy. This study examined state variation in federal child care subsidy (CCDF) program policies including eligibility, priority, copays, and activity requirements for families involved in child-welfare. Findings showed that, overall, states made fewer accommodations in their CCDF policies for children in foster care than for those otherwise involved in child welfare, such as by waving copays and activity requirements. Three typologies of states' CCDF policies were identified using latent class analysis: an accommodating typology, a selective accommodations typology, and a not accommodating typology. The relationships between these typologies and indicators of states' child welfare placements (types and stability) were also explored. Findings have implications for state policymakers and researchers interested in the integration and improvement of services for vulnerable children and families.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) is to facilitate employment and to promote positive child development for low-income families (Adams & Rohacek, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2011a). CCDF is the federal government's largest child care program, serving more than 1.4 million children, on average, per month in 2013 (US-DHHS, 2013a) and is central to the network of Early Care and Education (ECE) programs (e.g. child care, state funded pre-K, Head Start) designed to promote the school readiness of low-income children in the United States. In 2013, approximately 8 billion total expenditures were committed to the CCDF subsidy program, with 79% or $ 6.765 billion spent on direct services (the provision of subsidies).

Similarly, the Children's Bureau, responsible for administering federal child welfare services, is charged with keeping children safe from early adversity (e.g. maltreatment), ensuring children's permanency in a safe home, and contributing to their well-being (P.L. 112–34, 2011). This three-pronged mission of safety, permanency, and well-being guides the child welfare system and the policies that states make within their child welfare systems.

Despite synergies in their missions, child care and child welfare policies have developed along largely separate tracks, leading to minimal overlap or coordination in services. Improving coordination across these sectors has the potential to reduce costs (Barbee & Antle, 2011; Heckman & Masterov, 2007), as well as to improve children's outcomes, especially considering efforts to ensure that subsidized child care is of high quality (US-DHHS, 2011a). An emerging line of research examines the role of child care and other ECE programs in the lives of children involved in child welfare (Dinehart, Manfra, Katz, & Hartman, 2012; Klein, 2011; Lipscomb & Pears, 2011; Lipscomb, Pratt, Schmitt, Pears, & Kim, 2013; Meloy & Phillips, 2012a; Merritt & Klein, 2015; Pratt, Lipscomb, & Schmitt, 2014). These studies indicate that children involved with child welfare, despite their vulnerability, have minimal access to high quality ECE but that children and parents involved with the child welfare system stand to benefit from such access.

In addition, preliminary evidence suggests that when early childhood and child welfare systems work together, access to ECE for children involved in child welfare improves (Meloy & Clincy, 2014). While this research is only recently underway, given the potential benefits for children, families, and state systems, the federal government is already working to increase access to quality care for children involved in child welfare through publications and a memorandum between the Children's Bureau and the Office of Child Care (US-DHHS, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d).

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Yet very little is understood about how states currently set CCDF policies that impact access to child care for children involved in child welfare. The federal government sets only a few parameters, including income and work requirements for the majority of eligible parents, and a small (4%, recently raised to 10% in 2014) set aside of funds for quality improvement (P.L. 104–193, 1996; PL 113–186, 2014). In addition, funding is limited and has been declining, leading to 263,000 fewer children receiving CCDBG-funded child care between 2006 and 2012 (Matthews & Schmit, 2014). Most decisions that affect how subsidies are actually allocated to families are made by states—in effect creating fifty child care subsidy policy systems. Thus, the availability of child care subsidies for families involved in child welfare and the rules accompanying eligibility vary by state. The current study aims to describe the most common ways in which states set CCDF policies for families involved in child welfare by estimating latent classes of states identified by their CCDF policies. Findings will broaden awareness of variation in state CCDF policies for families involved in child welfare across the U.S., contribute to federal conversations about the implementation of CCDF within states, and inform state policy makers about the various ways states set CCDF policies for children involved in child welfare. Documentation of differences in state CCDF policies for children involved with child welfare is also foundational to future investigations of how these policies affect the outcomes of vulnerable children and families. Additionally, the current study provides a preliminary analysis of the contexts within which these CCDF policies for children involved in child welfare exist, by examining associations between latent classes of policies and state-level indicators of child welfare placements (types and stability) that children experience.

1.1. The role of child welfare placement type and stability on child well-being

Children from families involved in the child welfare system face risks that may compromise their development in nearly every domain, making it difficult for them to enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. Children involved in child welfare often experience prenatal exposure to alcohol (Astley, Stachowaik, Clarren, & Clausen, 2002), poverty (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Sousa & Sorensen, 2006), caregiver mental health problems (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 2000), maltreatment (Chernoff, Combs-Orme, Risley-Curtiss, & Heisler, 1994; Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008), and unstable home environments (Rubin, O'Reilly, Hafner, Luan, & Localio, 2007). They also have higher rates of premature birth and low birth weight (McGuinness & Schneider, 2007; Needell & Barth, 1998). Consequently, children involved in child welfare often struggle with behavioral and mental health (Billing, Ehrle, & Kortenkamp, 2002; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Rubin et al., 2007; Stahmer et al., 2005), as well as with academic achievement and school engagement (Billing et al., 2002; Pears, Heywood, Kim, & Fisher, 2011; Scherr, 2007). They also have more special education needs (Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994; Scherr, 2007).

The three key child welfare goals of safety, permanency, and well-being, are intended to minimize these negative consequences and help get children on the path to healthy development (P.L. 112–34, 2011). To achieve these goals, child welfare systems institute policies to maximize children's likelihood of being safe from the trauma of abuse and neglect, are in a stable home environment, and are receiving services that promote their well-being. However, achieving all three goals simultaneously for all children is extremely challenging (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2012; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

To maximize child safety, one common child welfare intervention involves removal from the home where the child abuse or neglect occurred. These removals result in a placement in a kinship foster home, relative foster home, group home, institution, or independent living arrangement. The goal of these placements is to keep the child safe in a permanent home that will contribute to improving his/her well-being, until such a time as the child is adopted or returned to the original home (Pecora et al., 2012). A focus on maximizing permanency, which can also be interpreted as "stability", means that the child welfare system strives to reduce the number of foster placements children experience by directing services to foster parents, and prevent multiple home removals by directing services to biological parents (Barth, 1994; Freundlich, Avery, Munson, & Gerstenzang, 2006). Further, while safety and permanency set the foundation for child well-being , in order to maximize child well-being, the child welfare system also coordinates with and links children to additional services such as health care, dental care, and education (Meloy & Phillips, 2012b; Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009; Wulczyn, 2005). While states may strive to advance these three goals equally, the challenges of working with at-risk children and families, with limited resources, often require tradeoffs between the three goals (Barth, 1994). For example, efforts to reunify children with their biological parents for their permanency and well-being too quickly may result in additional instability if children experience additional abuse or neglect and must be removed from their home again (Connell et al., 2009; Fuller, 2005). Additionally, prioritizing resources to support intact families in order to minimize the number of children removed from their homes may mean that fewer dollars are available to provide supportive services (e.g. child care subsidies) to foster families.

Finally, the relative proportion of children placed in various home arrangements (e.g. relative care, non-relative foster care, group homes) may also affect decisions about how to allocate resources to best meet the needs of families involved in the child welfare system within a given state. For example, states that rely more heavily on traditional non-relative foster caregivers than on relative foster caregivers may direct more resources towards foster parents, in general.

As states set policies for child welfare practice, the characteristics of their child welfare population and limited resources, as well as political preferences and priorities, may dictate weighing one goal more heavily than the others (Barth, 1999; Meloy & Phillips, 2012b). Studies that explore these policy decisions must be interpreted with these challenges and nuances in mind.

1.2. Implications of child care subsidies for children involved with child welfare

In general, access to child care subsidies may be a particularly important intervention for improving the well-being of children from high-risk families, such as those involved in the child welfare system. Several of the risks and resulting struggles (e.g. poverty, special educational needs) experienced by children involved with child welfare overlap with those exhibited by children who have been shown to benefit most from high quality early care experiences including poverty and special educational needs (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008; Gormley, Phillips, Newmark, Welti, & Adelstein, 2011; Phillips & Meloy, 2012; Reynolds, Rolnick, Englund, & Temple, 2010). Other risks, such as prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, maltreatment, and home caregiving instability represent additional sensitivities that may heighten their need for quality early care to help children overcome the early adversity they experience at home.

Research on child care assistance for low-income families suggests two ways in which child care subsidies may play a role in the lives of families involved in child welfare. First, CCDF subsidies have been successful in supporting the employment of low-income parents (Forry, 2009; Tekin, 2004, 2007). There is every reason to believe that child care subsidies have the same potential to serve as an essential employment support for families involved with child welfare, including foster parents, who commonly report the need for additional financial resources (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Klein, 2011). Second, assistance in the form of subsidies typically leads parents to choose center-based over home-based care (Crosby, Gennetian, & Huston, 2005), and higher quality care (Johnson, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012; Ryan, Johnson,

Rigby, & Brooks-Gunn, 2011). To the extent that access to subsidies improves the economic security of child welfare-involved families and promotes access to center-based and higher quality child care, evidence suggests that such access may lead to more positive outcomes for children involved with child welfare both directly (Dinehart et al., 2012; Kaiser, Katz, Ullery, & Dinehart, 2011; Lipscomb, Schmitt, Pratt, Acock, & Pears, 2014) and indirectly through improved parent efficacy and reduced parental stress (Waldfogel, 2009; Zhai, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013), fewer instances of child abuse and neglect (Green et al., 2013) and more positive parenting practices (Pratt et al., 2014; Waldfogel, 2009; Zhai et al., 2013).

1.3. Prior studies of CCDF policies for children involved in child welfare

To date there have not been any investigations of CCDF policies across states for children involved in child welfare. CCDF policies that could increase access to child care subsidies for families involved in child welfare revolve around eligibility, priority, and copays. Two studies have utilized child care subsidy and child welfare data from Oregon (Lipscomb, Lewis, Masyn, & Meloy, 2012) and Illinois (Meloy & Phillips, 2012a) to begin understanding how families involved in child welfare interface with child care subsidy systems. These studies provide a glimpse at the variation across states in the policies states set regarding child care subsidies for families involved in child welfare. In Illinois, children in foster care are eligible for child care subsidies on a case by case basis. Meloy and Phillips (2012a) found that within this policy context in Illinois, having a foster parent who received a child care subsidy was associated with a lower likelihood of children experiencing a disruption in foster placements, but also found a relatively low frequency of subsidy receipt among foster parents (11%). Oregon's CCDF policy considers children involved in child welfare the same as other children from low-income families. In this policy context, Lipscomb et al. (2012) found relatively low rates of child care subsidy use among families involved in child welfare, compared to other low-income families; the lowest rates of subsidy use were for children placed out of their biological homes and those with more instability in child welfare placements. Moreover, this study also revealed higher instability in child care subsidy use among children involved in child welfare, compared to other children from low-income families (Lipscomb et al., 2012).

These two studies illustrate differences in state child care assistance systems' consideration of children involved in child welfare, and set the stage for the current study to examine such variation systematically across all 50 states. They also offer insights into the implications that policy differences may have for children and families, as discussed earlier, as well as for states.

1.4. Present study

The focus of the current study is to examine how states implement the federal child care subsidy program (CCDF) with respect to children involved in child welfare. We look at how states set policies related to CCDF eligibility, priority, and activity (e.g. work or school) requirements for families involved in child welfare, including children in foster care. This work is highly relevant to federal and state efforts to increase access to quality child care for children with high needs, such as those involved in child welfare. By documenting how states set CCDF policies for children involved in child welfare, this study creates opportunities for states to learn from one another, and for the federal government to better understand how CCDF is implemented for this vulnerable population of children.

Given the findings of previous state-level inquiries (Lipscomb et al., 2012; Meloy & Phillips, 2012a), we expect to identify qualitatively different patterns of CCDF policies (related to eligibility, priority, and copays) for families involved in child welfare across states. For example, we anticipate that one group of states will be identified by multiple policies that increase access to child care subsidies for children involved in child welfare. We further expect that some states will waive certain eligibility or activity requirements but not others, or might have more generous policies for children in foster care or CPS but not both. Still other states might not make any special provisions for these populations, and/or might exclude children in foster care or CPS from eligibility for the CCDF program altogether.

Additionally, we explore how indicators of the stability and type of placements children experience within their state child welfare system are related to the ways in which states implement CCDF for these children. For example, states with larger proportions of children in foster care placed with relatives and non-relatives, compared to other placement settings, may see a greater need to set specific CCDF policies for children in foster care. Finally, given emerging research on the association between child care subsidy receipt and placement stability (Meloy & Phillips, 2012a), we anticipate that states with policies that make subsidies more accessible to children involved in child welfare will have lower rates of home removals and numbers of child welfare placements (indicators of stability) than states that make few, or no, accommodations in CCDF policy for these families. Due to very limited prior research in this area the analysis of predictors of state CCDF policies for children involved in child welfare should be considered preliminary. It represents an important first step to guide further investigations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data sources

Data used in these analyses were obtained by merging files from the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Policies Database and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). The CCDF Policies Database contains national data on state laws, policies, and regulations pertaining to child care subsidy programs operating under the CCDF. The database covers policies across the 50 US states, the District of Columbia and five US territories. It includes information describing eligibility requirements, subsidy amounts, copay amounts, application procedures, and administrative items. These state-level data come from caseworker documents, biannual plans and reports submitted to ACF, as well as state laws and regulations in 2011.

AFCARS is a federally mandated data collection system detailing case-level information on children currently in the foster care system and those children who have been adopted with child welfare agency involvement across the 50 states,[1] the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Data come from the state child welfare agencies, as required by section 479 of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. States must collect and submit data from child welfare agencies every six months, on all adopted children who have been placed by a state welfare agency or a private agency contracted with the public child welfare agency and on all children in foster care whose placement was done by or overseen by a state welfare agency. The database is run by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) out of Cornell University. The AFCARS dataset is separated into Adoption and Foster Care cases — for the purposes of this analysis we focused solely on those relating to Foster Care. AFCARS data are child case-level and have been aggregated to the state level for use in the current study. This study utilizes AFCARS data from 2011 in order to correspond with the 2011 CCDF data. AFCARS data are used to measure state-level averages/proportions for children's number of foster care placements, number of CPS home removals, types of foster care placements, and child age and disability status (see Measures section).

[1] Due to data quality issues, Connecticut data were removed from the AFCARS dataset as requested by the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

2.2. Sample

The current sample included 51 state-level observations (49 states, and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico). We excluded four U.S. territories from our analysis because they were not included in the AFCARS data (American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, and the US Virgin Islands).

Prior to aggregation at the state-level, the AFCARS dataset included 434,096 children who were under the age of 12 in foster care in 2011. We limited our use of AFCARS data to those children who were 12 years old or younger in order to reflect the population that could be eligible for CCDF funding. The average age of the children was 4.5 years; 52.3% were male, and 20.3% had a clinically diagnosed disability. Regarding race, approximately two thirds (66.0%) of the children were White, while 27.2% were Black, 15.7% were of Hispanic origin, 7.8% were American Indian, 1.75% were Asian, and the remaining 1.6% were Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Approximately 43.4% of the children in this sample from the AFCARS dataset were living in a foster home with a non-relative, 26.8% were in a foster home with a relative, 10.2% were in a pre-adoptive home, 3.3% were in an institution, 2.7% were in a group home, 0.08% were in a trial home and 0.03% had run away. Only 1.5% of the sample from the AFCARS had ever been adopted, while the average number of placements was 2.27 and the average number of removals from their parents was 1.22 per child.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Child care policy variables

Three key CCDF policies were selected and coded for how accommodating they were of a) young children in foster care and b) young children otherwise involved with child welfare or child protective services (termed "CPS-involved"), resulting in a total of six CCDF policy variables. These policies reflected the activity requirements for parents and foster parents to receive subsidies, whether or not priority for subsidy receipt was given to these parents, and whether any accommodations were made to reduce co-pay requirements for these parents when they did receive subsidies. Each variable is defined below.

2.3.1.1. Activity requirements (eligibility). Two variables describe activity requirements: one for families providing foster care and another for families otherwise involved in CPS. The variable 'activity requirements for CPS-involved' was coded such that 0 = children involved with CPS were not eligible for subsidies; 1 = the state had the same activity requirements for CPS-involved families as for other families; 2 = activity requirements could be waived by caseworkers for CPS-involved families, on a case-by-case basis; 3 = activity requirements were waived automatically for CPS-involved families. Similarly, the variable 'activity requirements for foster care' was coded such that 0 = children in foster care were not eligible for subsidies; 1 = the state had the same activity requirements for foster families as for other families; 2 = activity requirements could be waived by foster families' caseworkers, on a case-by-case basis, or families of specific subgroups of foster children were exempt (e.g. special needs children); 3 = activity requirements were waived automatically if children were in foster care.

2.3.1.2. Priority. Two variables describe prioritization of children for subsidies: one for families providing foster care and another for families otherwise involved in CPS. The variable 'priority for CPS-involved' was coded such that 0 = children in CPS-involved families were not eligible for subsidies; 1 = children in CPS-involved families receive the same priority as other CCDF-eligible families; 2 = children in CPS-involved families receive priority over other eligible families, but are not guaranteed a subsidy; 3 = the state guarantees children in CPS-involved families a subsidy. Similarly, the variable 'priority for foster care' was coded such that 0 = children in foster families were not eligible for subsidies; 1 = children in foster families receive the same priority as other CCDF-eligible families; 2 = children in foster families receive priority over other eligible families, but are not guaranteed a subsidy; 3 = the state guarantees children in foster families a subsidy.

2.3.1.3. Copays. Two variables describe state copay policies: one for families providing foster care and another for families otherwise involved in CPS. The variable 'copay for CPS-involved' was coded such that 0 = children in CPS-involved families were ineligible for CCDF subsidies; 1 = children in CPS-involved families were eligible but copayments were not waived; 2 = CPS-involved families could have copayments waived at their caseworker's discretion; 3 = copayments were always waived for children in CPS-involved families. Similarly, the variable 'copay for foster care' was coded such that 0 = children in foster families were ineligible for CCDF subsidies; 1 = children in foster families were eligible but copayments were not waived; 2 = foster families could have copayments waived at their caseworker's discretion; 3 = copayments were always waived for children in foster families.

2.3.2. Child welfare placement indicator variables

Several key variables were selected from the AFCARS dataset as indicators of the child welfare experiences of children who are involved with child protective services and those that experience out of home placements at the state level. Specifically, the variables that describe these experiences aggregated at the state level include the average number of removals from the home over the course of child's life, the average number of foster care placements experienced within the current removal, and the percentage of all foster care placements that were of each care type.

2.3.2.1. Number of removals. When children experience a substantiated case of child abuse or neglect and the child welfare agency determines it is not in their best interest to remain at home, the agency will remove them from their home. Children who have more than one removal, therefore have been reunified with their parents and then have experienced another case of substantiated child abuse or neglect, and have been removed again. The 'number of home removals per child in foster care' variable describes the average number of times children in a given state have ever been removed from their home. Multiple home removals at the state level represent substantial instability in the lives of children involved in the child welfare system in that state. However, multiple home removals at the state level may still occur within contexts in which the state child welfare agency has a strong commitment to reunifying children with their parents.

2.3.2.2. Number of placements during current removal. When children are removed from their homes due to a substantiated case of child abuse or neglect, they are placed into alternative homes. To the extent possible, the goal of child welfare agencies is to minimize the number of different placements children experience. However, children may experience multiple placements if their caregivers in the initial placement decline to continue caring for them or if another placement that is considered better for the child becomes available. The 'number of foster care placements per child in foster care' variable describes the average number of placements that children have experienced *since their latest removal from their home*, excluding trial homes, in each state foster care system.

2.3.2.3. Type of placements. The placements that children experience when they are removed from their homes may be with relatives, non-relatives, or in facilities that are designed to care for multiple children with significant emotional or behavioral problems, and older children, called group homes. The 'proportion of children in foster care system placed with relatives' and the 'proportion of children in foster care placed with non-relatives' variables describe the proportion of children in each type of placement at the state level at the time of the survey. The variables used in this study represent the proportion of each state's

entire foster care population that was placed with relatives and non-relatives compared to all other placement options, respectively.

2.3.2.4. Demographics. The average age of all children in foster care in each state system was calculated as of the beginning of the fiscal year (October 1, 2011), and the proportion of children in foster care in each state system with a diagnosed disability was calculated as of the date of the survey.

2.4. Analysis plan

Examination of patterns of CCDF policies and explorations of their associations with child welfare placement indicators was conducted through latent class analysis. Latent class analysis of the six CCDF policy variables was conducted within a general latent variable framework, allowing investigation of exogenous predictors of states' probability of membership in each latent class (Muthén, 2002). This latent class model has advantages over other approaches because class membership remains probabilistic rather than deterministic, which improves precision when estimating effects of exogenous predictors (Roeder, Lynch, & Nagin, 1999).

To identify the optimal number of latent classes, several models with varying numbers of classes were compared with one another. To date, there is no single index of model fit that can be used to clearly determine the most appropriate number of classes; current practice suggests the use of several model fit indices simultaneously. The Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC), which simultaneously accounts for model fit, sample size, and the number of parameters estimated in the model, has been shown to perform reasonably well in determining the correct number of patterns in simulation analyses (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007). When comparing several models with varying numbers of classes or patterns, the model with the lowest BIC value is considered to be the most optimal fit. The Akaike information criterion (AIC) is another measure of relative model fit in which the lowest value represents the most optimal fit. The Likelihood Ratio Test (LRT) is often used to compare alternative models, but cannot be used to compare nested models with varying numbers of latent classes (McLachlan & Peel, 2000). There are two alternatives to the LRT that *can* be used to compare nested latent class models: the Lo–Mendell–Rubin LRT (LMR-LRT) and the bootstrap LRT (BLRT). Both the LMR-LRT and BLRT provide *p* values to compare *k* class models to $k - 1$ class models (e.g. Nylund et al., 2007). Entropy was also considered; entropy is a function of posterior class probabilities and helps to determine the extent of separation or distinction between classes. Entropy values range between zero and one, with higher values indicating better separation between classes. Slight variations in entropy between models are typical; more dramatic shifts may be an indication of model mis-specification or an unreasonable number of classes. In addition to examining these empirical markers, we also considered the practical and theoretical implications of models with varying numbers of classes.

Finally, child welfare placement indicators, from the AFCARS database, were examined as exogenous predictors of states' probability of membership in latent classes, utilizing full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) with Mplus Version 6.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2010). Predictors were considered to be significant when the parameter for the hypothesized relationship had a significant t-value (ratio of the parameter estimate to the standard error of the estimate), with *p* values less than .05.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics show moderate levels of accommodations in CCDF policies for children involved in CPS and foster care (Table 1). The policies with the least degree of accommodation overall are foster care activity requirements and priority for children in foster care. Zero-order correlations show moderate to large associations among CCDF policy variables; associations are slightly larger within than between CPS and foster care variables (Table 2). The only AFCARS variable that was significantly correlated with CCDF variables was the number of home removals per child, aggregated at the state-level.

3.1. Latent classes of CCDF policies for children in foster care and CPS

Results from latent class analysis of CCDF policy variables suggested that there were three distinct typologies of states' approaches to policies for children involved in CPS and foster care. As shown in Table 3, the AIC and BIC both decrease substantially from the one-class model to the two- and then the three-class model but only decrease slightly for the four-class model. This pattern suggests that a four-class model does not improve much upon the three-class model. Given the increased number of parameters estimated in the four class-model, the pattern of AIC and BIC results are most supportive of a three-class model. The LMR-LRT and the sample-size adjusted LMR-LRT also both support a three-class model. The BLRT, on the other hand, indicates that each successive model is better than the previous one. Entropy is good for all models, indicating clear distinction between classes. Collectively, these results, considered in the context of the principle of parsimony, show the strongest support for a three-class model. The proportion of states in the smallest latent class (18%) is reasonable for the three-class model.

Fig. 1 illustrates the three typologies of how states address CCDF policies for children involved in CPS and foster care. As previously described in the Analysis Plan, membership in the latent classes is probabilistic rather than deterministic; the model estimated states' probability of membership in each of the three latent classes and identified the class to which the state was most likely (but not necessarily) to belong, based on the states' scores on each of the six CCDF variables.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for all study variables (N = 50 states).

	M	SD	Min	Max
CCDF policy accommodations[a]				
Activity requirement for CPS-involved	1.80	1.07	0	3
Activity requirement for foster care	1.31	0.97	0	3
Priority for CPS-involved	1.55	1.06	0	3
Priority for foster care	1.22	0.92	0	3
Copay for CPS-involved	1.76	1.14	0	3
Copay for foster care	1.75	1.23	0	3
AFCARS variables				
Number of home removals per child in foster care[b]	1.22	0.09	1.03	1.45
Number of foster care placements per child within current removal[b]	2.27	0.38	1.03	3.34
Proportion of children in foster care placed with relatives	0.27	0.09	0.10	0.51
Proportion of children in foster care placed with non-relatives	0.43	0.10	0.23	0.64
Proportion of children in foster care with a diagnosed disability	0.20	0.13	0.01	0.52

[a] Scores for CCDF policy variables range from 0 to 3, with higher scores reflecting a higher degree of accommodation for children involved in CPS and/or foster care.
[b] Values represent averages per child within each state.

Table 2
Correlations for all study variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Activity requirement CPS	–											
2. Activity requirement foster	.48**	–										
3. Priority CPS	.66**	.47**	–									
4. Priority foster	.44**	.57**	.69**	–								
5. Copay CPS	.70**	.47**	.67**	.52**	–							
6. Copay foster	.41**	.61**	.37**	.60**	.48**	–						
7. Average # removals	−.24†	−.18	−.32*	−.11	−.25†	−.10	–					
8. Average # placements within current removal	−.04	.13	−.05	.04	−.11	.10	.04	–				
9. Proportion foster relative	−.23	.12	−.12	.16	.01	.10	.06	−.22	–			
10. Proportion foster non-relative	.19	−.03	.23	.19	.138	.12	.10	−.24	−.29*	–		
11. Proportion with disability	−.06	−.16	−.08	−.11	−.06	−.09	.09	.09	−.18	−.06	–	
12. Average child age	−.09	−.12	−.04	−.14	−.08	−.10	−.02	−.28*	−.18	.20	−.03	–

** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.
† $p < .10$.

The smallest class, labeled "not accommodating", represents approximately 18% of the sample ($n = 9$). In the states most likely to be in this class children involved in CPS and foster care were generally either not eligible for child care subsidies through CCDF or were considered the same as other families. Findings did not distinguish states that considered these children as ineligible from those treating them the same as other children; some states only considered children in foster care ineligible but considered children otherwise involved in CPS the same as other children with respect to CCDF policies.

The largest class, labeled "selective accommodations", represents approximately 59% of the sample ($n = 30$). States that were most likely to be in this group made accommodations for both children in CPS and children in foster care by waiving copays. Sometimes they also waived activity (e.g. work) requirements for families of children involved in CPS (average score just above 2 on "CPS activity" for this class). Yet activity requirements were not typically waived for children in foster care. States most likely to be in this group also treated children in CPS and foster care the same as other children when determining priority for subsidy receipt (average score around 1 for "CPS priority" and "foster care priority" for this class); children in CPS and foster care were not given priority over other children. The third class, labeled, "accommodating", represents approximately 24% of the sample ($n = 12$). States most likely to be in this group made substantial accommodations for children in both CPS and foster care, although states had slightly more generous CCDF policies for children in CPS than for those in foster care (see Fig. 1).

Additionally, results are consistent with findings from preliminary analyses, which indicated that states make more accommodations for children involved in CPS than they do for children in foster care. This was true for both the "accommodating" and "selective accommodations" group.

3.2. Links between child welfare placement indicators and CCDF policies

When states' probabilities of membership in the three latent groups based on CCDF policies were regressed on child welfare placement indicators from the AFCARS dataset, findings revealed that states that were most likely to belong to the "accommodating" group had significantly fewer home removals than states that were most likely to belong to either of the other two groups. This means that within their respective child welfare populations children experienced fewer removals from their homes, on average, in states with CCDF policies that make the most accommodations for children in CPS and foster care (Table 4). Alternatively, states that were most likely to belong to the "accommodating" group had a significantly higher average number of foster care placements within the current home removal per child than did states in either of the other two groups.

The states that were most likely to belong to the "accommodating" group also had a larger proportion of their children in foster care who were placed with non-relatives than the states in the other two groups, and also a larger proportion of their children in foster care placed with relatives than the states most likely to be in the "selective accommodations" group. Nearly all of the children in foster care in the states that tended to make a lot of accommodations for children involved in child welfare were placed with either relative or non-relatives. The states with a high probability of belonging to the "not accommodating" and "selective accommodations" classes had more variety in types of out-of-home child welfare placements.

Table 3
Model results from latent class analysis of CCDF policy variables.

Number of classes	Number of parameters estimated	Entropy	AIC	BIC	Sample-size adjusted BIC	BLRT
1	18	n/a	808.77	843.54	787.03	n/a
2	25	.99	757.25	805.548	727.06	.00
3	32	.99	732.27	794.090	693.62	.00
4	39	.96	712.33	787.667	665.22	.33

4. Discussion

Findings from the current study revealed that states vary with respect to whether and to what degree their child care subsidy systems make accommodations for child welfare-involved families. Our results suggest three typologies for how states address CCDF policies for children involved with child welfare. The first typology, which was estimated to include 9 states, was characterized by no accommodations for families involved in the child welfare system; states likely to belong to this class tended to treat these families as either ineligible for CCDF subsidies or the same as all other families. The most accommodating states, of which the model estimated 12, tended to make substantial accommodations for families involved with child welfare, especially intact families involved with child welfare. The majority of all states (30), however, were most likely to be characterized by a typology of selective accommodations for families involved in the child welfare system, but tended not to prioritize these families for subsidy receipt. Like the group of states that was most accommodating, these states also tended to be more accommodating of intact families involved with child welfare than of foster families.

4.1. State variation in child welfare subsidy support

The three patterns of child care subsidy policy accommodations that emerged offer some insight into the consideration and prioritization of special populations of children and families in state policy making. Of particular interest is the group of states that tended to treat children

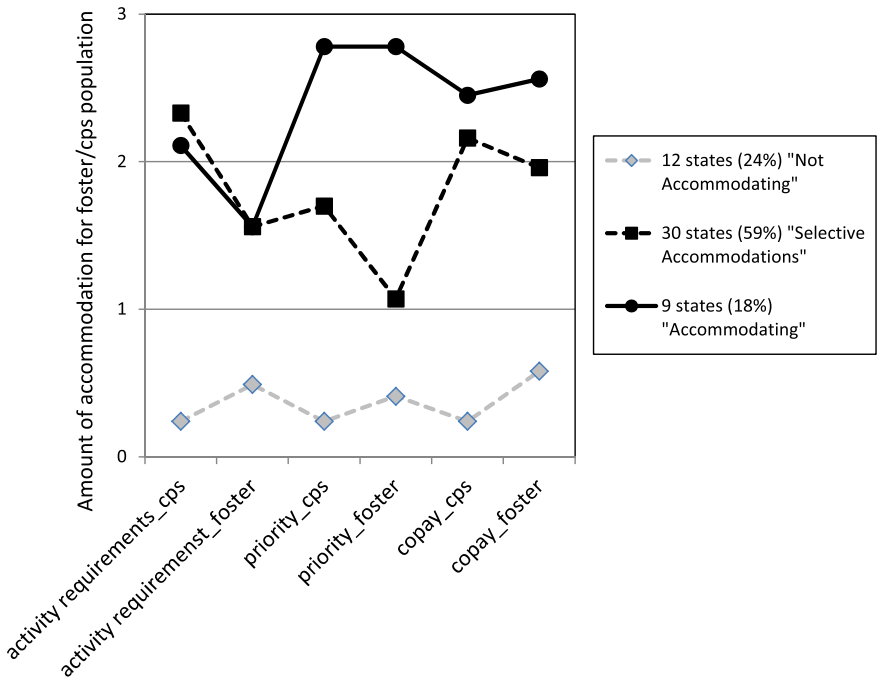

Fig. 1. CCDF Subsidy Policy Typologies.

involved in the child welfare system as either ineligible for child care subsidies or the same as other families. The current study was not able to identify the rationale for state policies. It may be that these states deem child care support less critical than other services these families need, and thus allocate few of their limited resources to providing such support. It is also possible, however, that some of these states offer alternative types of support for families involved with child welfare that are not captured in the CCDF policy data base analyzed in the current study. In fact, like Illinois, these states may even operate systems for child care and early education support for families involved with child welfare, specifically, funded by child welfare dollars, rather than no supports at all. Future research on additional child care assistance programs for families involved in child welfare is needed to better understand the context within which CCDF policies for families involved in child welfare are made.

Another interesting pattern of findings involves both the accommodating and selective accommodations groups. States estimated to belong in one of these groups were more likely to waive copays and activity requirements for families involved with child welfare than they were to prioritize them for subsidy receipt. This pattern may reflect limited flexibility among states with regard to prioritization, specifically. Limited funds and long waiting lists for CCDF subsidies may pressure states to focus policy accommodations in areas that are less likely to result in other vulnerable populations, including homeless families and children with special needs, being denied or losing their subsidies.

These patterns suggest that most states identify families involved with child welfare as vulnerable and often make some policy accommodations to support them. However, these patterns also highlight the competing pressures that state policy makers may face when weighing policy decisions in the context of limited funds to support these vulnerable families. Future research is needed to better understand why states vary so widely and how entire packages of supports for these families affect the broader context in which child care subsidies are provided.

4.2. Family preservation vs. foster care support

Across the board, states were more accommodating of intact families involved with child welfare than they were of foster families. This theme may reflect a common but somewhat narrow focus of state funds and priorities within the child welfare system on child safety and permanency planning and the resulting concentration of services for biological parents (Stepleton, McIntosh, & Corrington, 2010; Stoltzfus, 2008). States may be more likely to view intact families through a prevention lens, and thus focus on supporting these families with additional services (including access to child care subsidies) to prevent children's removal and placement within the foster care system.

This pattern may also be driven, in part, by the assumption that foster parents, especially those who receive foster care payments from the state, should be staying at home, thus obviating the need for child care (Meloy & Phillips, 2012b; Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000). However,

Table 4
Effects of child welfare placement indicators on states' probability of membership in latent classes of CCDF policies.

Effect of:	Comparisons across latent classes of CCDF policies		
	"Accommodating" vs. "not accommodating"	"Accommodating" vs. "selective"	"Selective" vs. "not accommodating"
	B	B	B
Average # removals	**−22.45**	**−13.86**	0.37
Average # placements within current removal	**4.33**	**4.70**	8.59
Proportion foster relative	12.52	**19.94**	7.42
Proportion foster non-relative	**29.65**	**25.89**	−3.76
Proportion with disability	−0.66	2.65	3.31
Average child age	2.82	1.40	1.42

Bolded estimates are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being suggest that this assumption is misguided. The survey documented that 41% of all primary foster parents in 1999 were working full-time, only 27% were not working at all, and 78% reported child care needs (NSCAW, 2003). As states become increasingly reliant on relative caregivers, who are more likely to work and be of working age (not retired), be low-income, have poorer health, as well as less likely to be married than traditional foster caregivers (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; Harden, 2004; NSCAW, 2003), the need for supports like child care subsidies among foster families is likely to continue to grow. These patterns suggest that states may want to consider re-evaluating their accommodation of foster families within their child care subsidy systems.

4.3. Subsidy policies and child welfare placement stability

Preliminary tests of associations between patterns of state CCDF policies and child welfare placement indicators suggested that children involved with the child welfare system in states who were the most accommodating of their families experienced significantly fewer removals from their homes, on average, than children in other states. Although this study cannot determine causality, when considered alongside previous research that has more directly linked child care assistance with child welfare placement stability (Meloy & Phillips, 2012a) this finding is suggestive of an important role for these supports within state child welfare systems. As a result of often severe early adversity, children in child welfare have a heightened need for stability and consistency in their lives (Harden, 2004). Unfortunately, they do not typically receive stable home care (Wulczyn, Hislop, & Harden, 2002). If accommodating child care subsidy policies lead more families involved with child welfare to receive child care subsidies, both children and states are likely to benefit. Children may benefit directly not only from more stable caregiving within the child welfare context, but also from more stable and higher quality child care placements brought about by subsidy use (Johnson et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2011). States may also benefit from service coordination and reducing placement instability (Barbee & Antle, 2011; Heckman & Masterov, 2007). In fact, a cost–benefit analysis of one coordinated intervention, the Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care program, which resulted in significant reductions in placement instability and failures, demonstrated significant returns on investment (Chamberlain, Fisher, & Moore, 2002; Fisher, Burraston, & Pears, 2005; Fisher, Kim, & Pears, 2009).

However, neither the current study, nor previous research can determine whether a causal relationship exists between child care subsidies and stability of child welfare placements. A further illustration of this point is apparent in the current study's finding that children in states who were the most accommodating of their families involved in child welfare also had more placements within their current removal, on average, than children in other states. This finding may illustrate a tendency to value stability in the biological home over stability in foster placements. On the other hand, these states may be working to promote child well-being as a priority before stability per se through their subsidy policies and their foster placement practices. Further research is needed to fully understand how states make their policy decisions and the effect those decisions have on children's experiences and outcomes.

4.4. Subsidy policies and child welfare placement type

Our findings linking state-level CCDF policies to the proportion of children in various types of out of home child welfare placements indicate that states with accommodating CCDF subsidies have higher rates of reliance on both relative and non-relative foster care. Consequently, accommodating states are less likely to utilize non-foster care forms of out-of-home placements for children under the age of 13, including institution and group home care. Research suggests that group home and institutional care is detrimental for young children. Accommodating states may focus more resources on children involved with the child welfare system, in general, leading them to utilize these forms of care with lower frequency.

5. Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study is the first to examine how states consider families involved with child welfare in their implementation of the federal child care subsidy program (CCDF). Given the ability for state policies to change over time, it is critical that this study was able to use large secondary datasets to link CCDF policy data and state foster care data from the same year (2011). By documenting patterns of ways that states set CCDF policies for children involved in child welfare this study creates opportunities for states to learn from one another, and for the federal government to better understand how CCDF is implemented for this vulnerable population of children.

One significant limitation of this study is that the data presented here only reflect CCDF subsidy policies, which are just one piece of an ECE system that may include child welfare funded subsidies, Head Start, and state funded pre-Kindergarten opportunities. Thus it is likely that the patterns of CCDF subsidy accommodations presented in this study do not fully capture the level of support states provide for families involved with child welfare to access high quality early childhood care and education. Additionally, the CCDF subsidy database utilized in the present study did not include any qualitative data about how these policy decisions were made, precluding examination of rationale (e.g. regarding competing demands and/or impressions about the needs of foster families). Furthermore, our exploration of the links between patterns of CCDF policies for families involved in child welfare and concurrent indicators of child welfare placements within states was not able to determine causality (e.g. of the link between subsidy policy accommodations for children involved with the child welfare system and child welfare placement stability). Further research into *how* and *why* states make these decisions would provide critical insight into levers for improving service integration and delivery for families involved with child welfare, as well as potential cost benefits for states.

Finally, the AFCARS data presented are also limited to foster care system information, and thus do not reflect the state by state variation that may be found in CPS-involved families in which children are protected in their homes. Without this information, it is impossible to generalize the findings linking foster care stability and CCDF subsidy accommodations to the broader population involved with child welfare. Future research that more clearly links ECE supports and related policy decisions to child welfare placement disruptions and removals is needed in order to more confidently inform state policy making.

Nonetheless, this study was able to confirm that states vary widely in whether and how they support the vulnerable young children who are involved with the child welfare system through the federal CCDF program. Considered together with prior evidence linking child care subsidies with higher quality care (Johnson et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2011), and quality care to child well-being for children involved with child welfare (Dinehart et al., 2012; Kaiser et al., 2011; Lipscomb et al., 2014; Merritt & Klein, 2015) findings suggest that variation in CCDF policies for children involved in child welfare have key implications for their development. Coordination of child welfare and child care services may also have implications for states struggling to provide quality services to children and families in increasingly tight fiscal environments by reducing costs associated with child welfare administration (Barbee & Antle, 2011; Heckman & Masterov, 2007).

This work is highly relevant to federal and state efforts to increase access to quality child care for children with the highest needs. Our findings are also suggestive that accommodating vulnerable families involved in child welfare through CCDF policies may help to reduce instability, which would have profound implications for state costs as well as for children's development. This study investigated an important facet of system coordination (between child care and child welfare systems) and lays the groundwork for future, more targeted research that

can build from the important foundation set by the current study to inform state policy decisions to support vulnerable young children and their families more effectively and efficiently.

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