

Consequences of Placing Children in Foster Care: Issues in Child Welfare Research

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Presentation to:

2013 TN Commission on Children and Youth
Children's Advocacy Days



Goals Today:

1. Describe research on the effects of foster care on long-term outcomes for children

Research separating Causation from Correlation

Interpretation can be subtle

2. Consider “The Big Questions” in child welfare

Child welfare literature

Your thoughts

Going Forward



Plan of Talk

Big Questions in Child Welfare

(Briefly) Why Answers Are So Important

Why The Questions Are Difficult to Answer

My Research

- Effects of Foster Care Placement on Child Outcomes
- Effects of Changes in Kinship Foster Care

Conclusions & Going Forward



Big Questions in Child Welfare

1. What Are the Effects of Foster Care Placement on Child Wellbeing?

Big Questions in Child Welfare

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Foster Care Placement: Difficult Decision

- What Types of Cases Benefit from Placement?
- What Types of Cases Show Harm from Placement?

Big Questions in Child Welfare

2. What Types of Placements Are Best? Relatives/Non-Relatives/Institutions

As before:

What Types of Cases Benefit from
Particular Placement Types?

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Child Welfare Affects Large Numbers of Children

>2 Million Investigations in the U.S. each year

Nearly 1 Million Found Abused/Neglected

>400,000 currently in Foster Care

\$25+ Billion spent on Child Protection each year

Child Welfare Affects Particularly At-Risk Children

Maltreated Children: 4 times higher childhood mortality

1400 deaths/year attributed to abuse or neglect

Former Foster Children:

- 28% of the Homeless Population
- 20% of Prison Inmates in US (under the age of 30)
- 25% of Prison Inmates w/ Prior Convictions
- Children who are still in foster care at 17:
 - 2/3 of boys and 1/2 of girls have been arrested.
 - 3 times more likely to have sexually transmitted disease
 - 4 times more likely to have mental illness

Competing Goods

Child Protection

Family Preservation

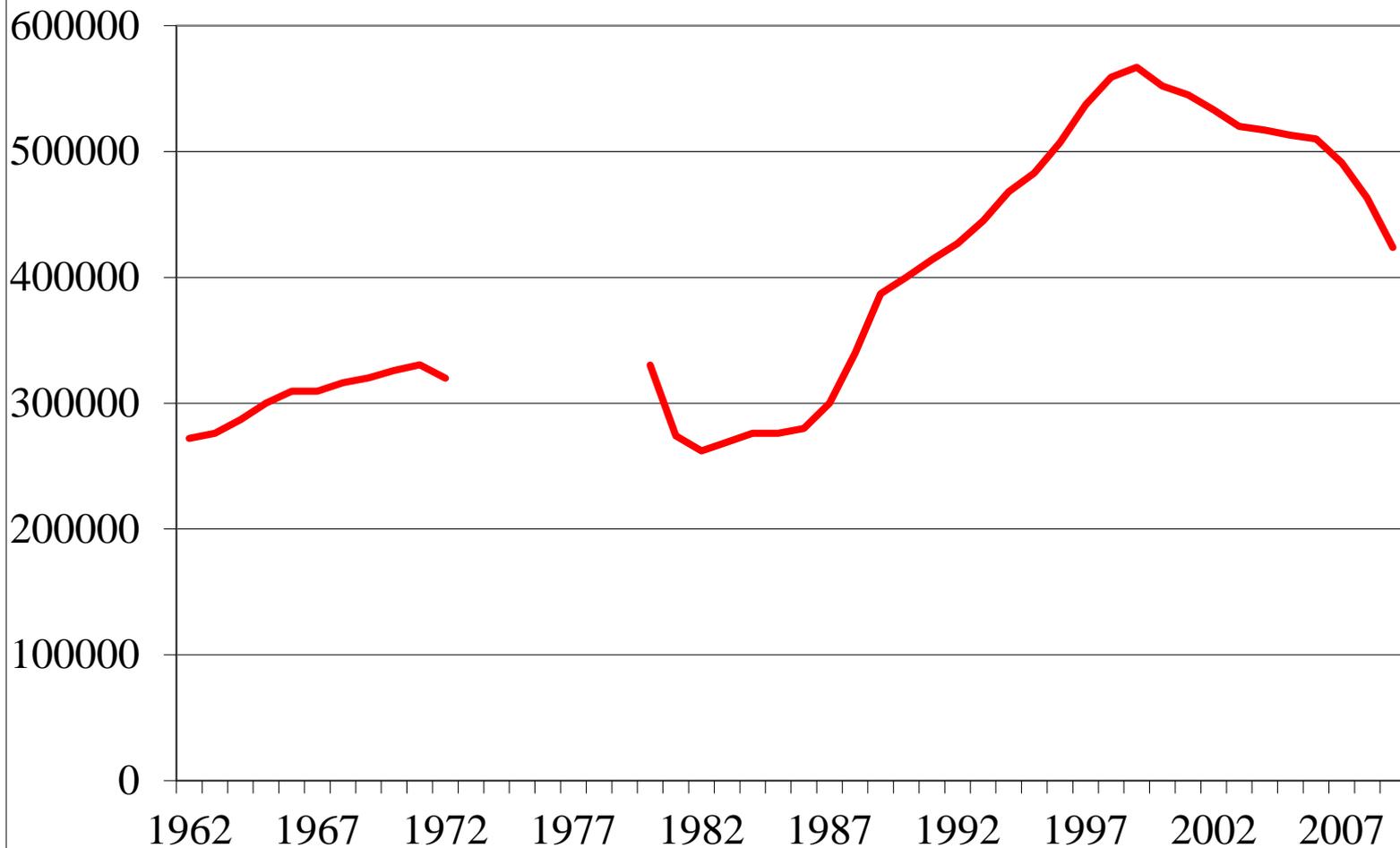
Aggressive Protection → More Placements

- More Type I Errors (False Positive)
- Fewer Type II Errors (False Negative)

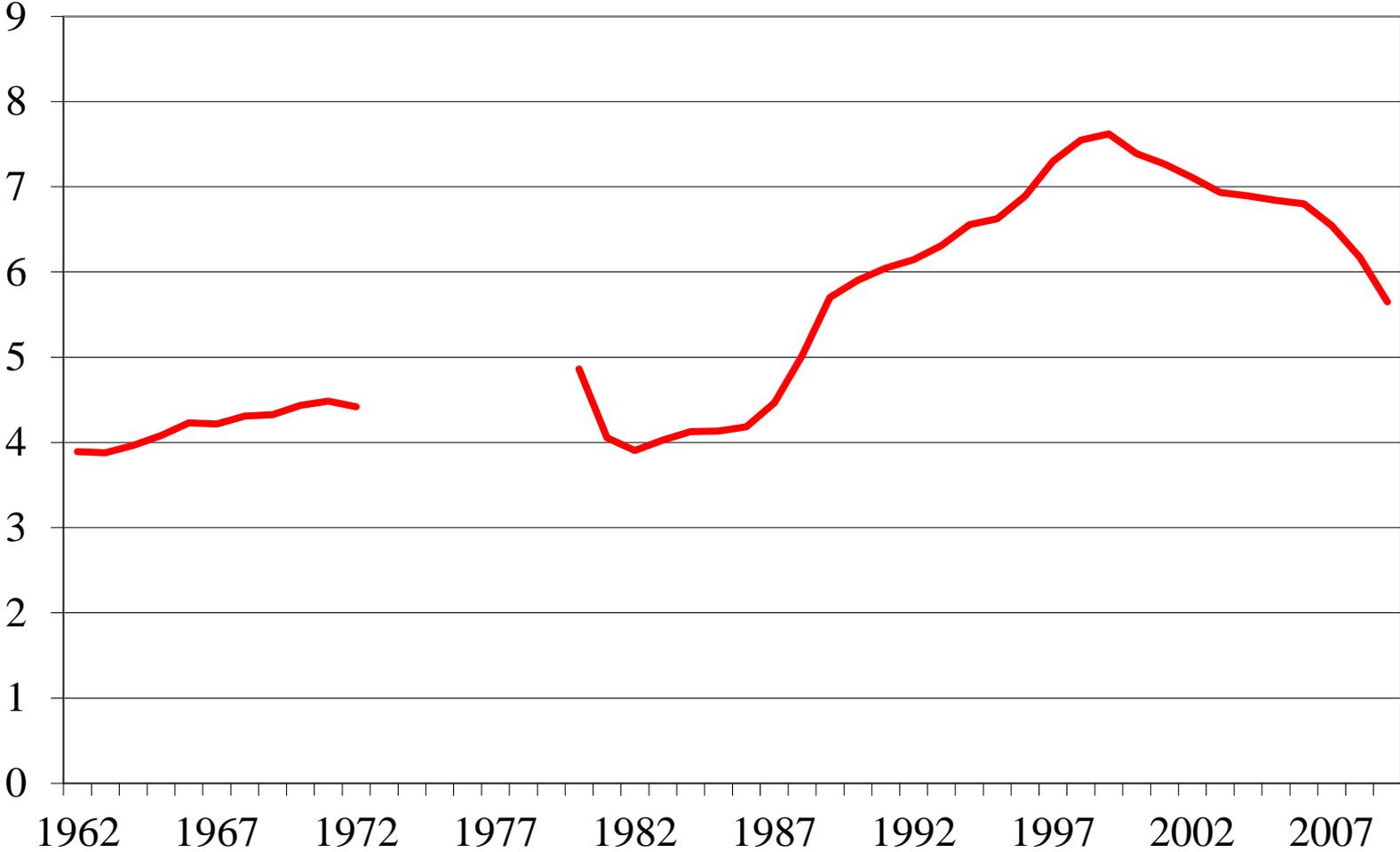
Incentives

- Public Attention on Type II Errors: Failure to remove a child who is later found to be abused

Children in Foster Care in the U.S. 1962-2009



Number of Children in Foster Care in the U.S.
(per thousand children)
1962-2009



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Estimation Issues

To Answer The Questions, We Want to Estimate:

Change in (Average) Outcomes For Children Placed in Foster Care

Compared to:

What Would have Happened if They Remained at Home



Estimation Issues

Previous Studies: Confounding Factors

- Ex: High Homelessness Rate: May be Due to Abusive Family Background
- Key Question: What Would the Likelihood of Homelessness be if the child had not been in Foster Care?
- Randomized trial—not an option ...

Another Estimation Problem: Lack of Data



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My Research

Attempt to Go Beyond Correlations and get to Causation

Ideas Involve “Natural Experiments” that mimic a randomized trial

Interpretation: Results Apply to Cases “Affected by the Natural Experiment”



Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Measuring the Effects of Foster Care



Introduction

What are the Effects of Foster Care Placement on Long-Term Outcomes:

- Lack of Data
- Estimation Issues

Children Placed are Selected: not randomly assigned

Children Placed Come from Troubled Families

Children Placed are Those Most Likely to Benefit

Background: Previous Evidence

Most Studies Compare FC with All Children

- More likely to be in Prison, Homeless, Suffer Mental Abuse
- Courtney et al. (2004): 2/3 of foster children who “age out” are arrested.

3 studies compare investigated children

- Runyan and Gould (1985): N=220, Little Difference in Delinquency
- Davidson-Arad et al. (2003): N=92, Interviews 6 months after investigation & removed children have better quality of life indicators.
- Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000): N=160,000, Children who received in-home services showed less delinquency than those who were removed or who did not receive in-home services.

My Research: Data

Chapin Hall Center for Children (U of Chicago) Illinois Administrative Data Linked across Programs:

Abuse Investigations Data Matched to:

- Juvenile Delinquency Court Records
- Teen Motherhood in Medicaid
- Employment in Unemployment Insurance Records
- Adult Arrests/Convictions/Prison from Illinois State Police
- & More...

ILLINOIS DATA SOURCES

Department of Children & Family Services:

July 1, 1990-June 30, 2001

-Child Age, Race, Sex, Address

-Initial Reporter

-Allegation

-Perpetrator (Parent, Step-Parent, Cohabiting Adult)

-Foster Care Entry (recorded through 2003)

Medicaid
1990-2003

Department of
Employment Security
Employment & Earnings
2002

Juvenile Court
Of Cook County
1990-2000

Illinois State Police
Arrests/Imprisonment
2000-2005

Table 1: Summary Statistics

| Variable | Outside Cook County | | Cook County | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|---------|-------------|---------|------|
| | Mean | Std Dev | Mean | Std Dev | |
| | Foster Care Placement | 0.16 | 0.36 | 0.26 | 0.44 |
| Race | white | 0.71 | 0.46 | 0.12 | 0.32 |
| | African American | 0.25 | 0.43 | 0.76 | 0.43 |
| | Hispanic | 0.03 | 0.18 | 0.11 | 0.31 |
| Initial Reporter | physician | 0.07 | 0.25 | 0.13 | 0.34 |
| | school | 0.17 | 0.38 | 0.13 | 0.33 |
| | police | 0.21 | 0.41 | 0.14 | 0.35 |
| | family | 0.18 | 0.38 | 0.27 | 0.45 |
| Age at Report | age | 11.0 | 3.1 | 11.0 | 3.0 |
| Sex | boy | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.49 | 0.50 |
| Allegation | lack of supervision | 0.26 | 0.44 | 0.35 | 0.48 |
| | environmental neglect | 0.11 | 0.31 | 0.15 | 0.36 |
| | substantial risk of harm | 0.35 | 0.48 | 0.24 | 0.43 |
| | physical abuse | 0.20 | 0.40 | 0.17 | 0.38 |
| | Observations | 23254 | | 21653 | |

Children investigated between July 1, 1990 and June 30, 2003 and were at least 18 in 2005.
Cook County includes the City of Chicago.

My Research: Main Idea

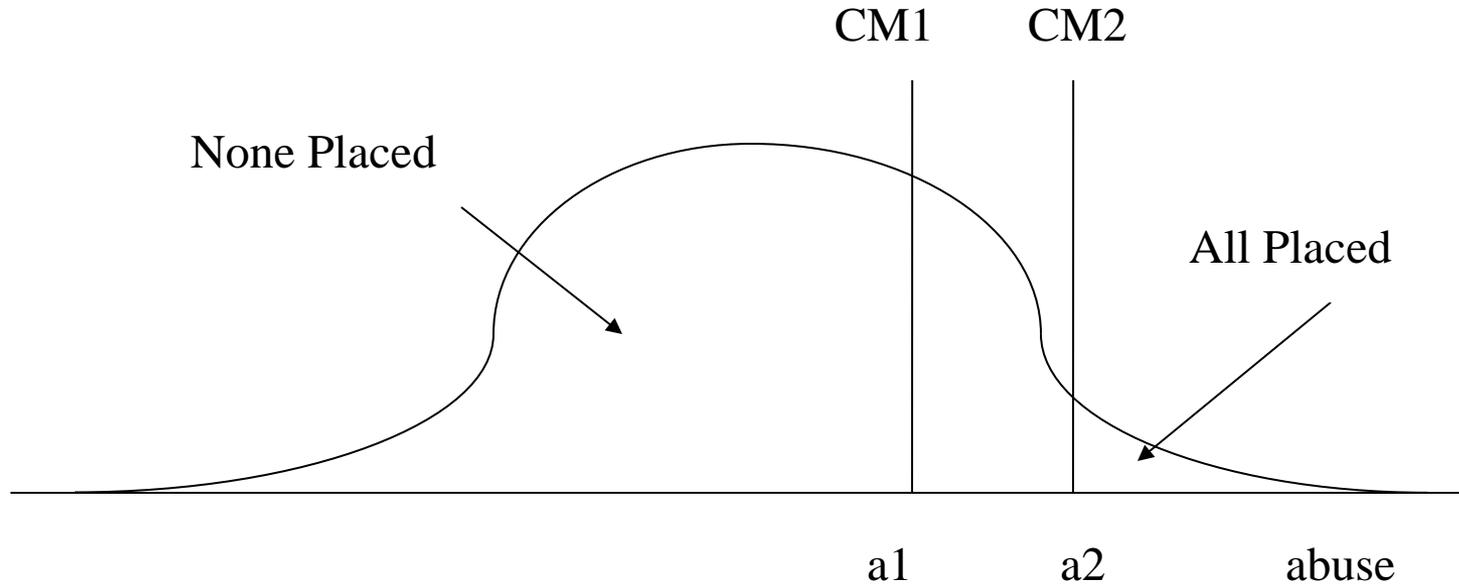
Consider Child Protection Investigators

- Most Families Are Effectively Randomized Families to Investigators
- Investigators Affect Removal
- Estimates of Interest:

Children “Affected by the Natural Experiment”:

Cases When Investigators May Disagree about a Placement Recommendation

Figure 1: Abuse Thresholds for Placement



CM1: Place if $a > a1$; CM2: Place if $a > a2$

Background

- All Investigations begin with State Central Register
- Case Assigned to a Field Team (County-level)
- Assigned to one of ~8 Investigators
- Decision 1: Determine if case has merit
- Decision 2: Emergency Removal
- Decision 3: Present Evidence to Judge for Longer Term Removal

Investigator Rotational Assignment

Exceptions

- Initial investigator
reassigned for any future
investigations
- Neighborhood Assignment
- Spanish-Speaking Cases

- Special Investigations
Sexual Abuse

Data Restrictions

- Investigator in First
Investigation

- Sub-team cells defined by:
TEAM x
ZIP x HISPANIC x YEAR

- Dropped from Analysis



Separating Causation from Correlation

Key Variable: How “Strict” is the Investigator?

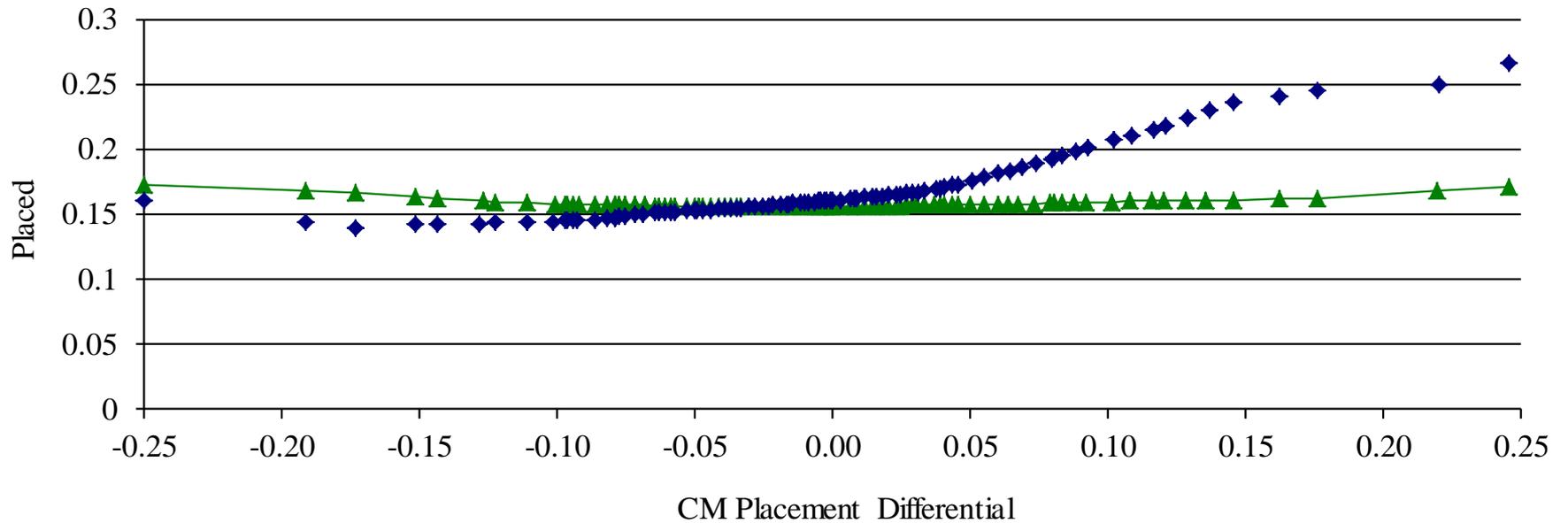
In cases other than a particular family’s case, what fraction of children investigated by that family’s case manager are placed, relative to placement rates of other investigators on the same team in a given year



Economics jargon: Investigator placement rate is an “instrumental variable”

FC Placement & Predicted FC Placement vs. CM Removal Differential:

◆ FC Placement ▲ P(Placement|X)



Interpretation

Investigator Type vs. Foster Care Placement

Investigators:

- do not supervise child once in foster care
- are not associated with observable characteristics
- focus on gathering facts for foster care placement recommendation

FC Placement & Arrest Rate vs. CM Placement Differential:

◆ FC Placement ■ Arrested

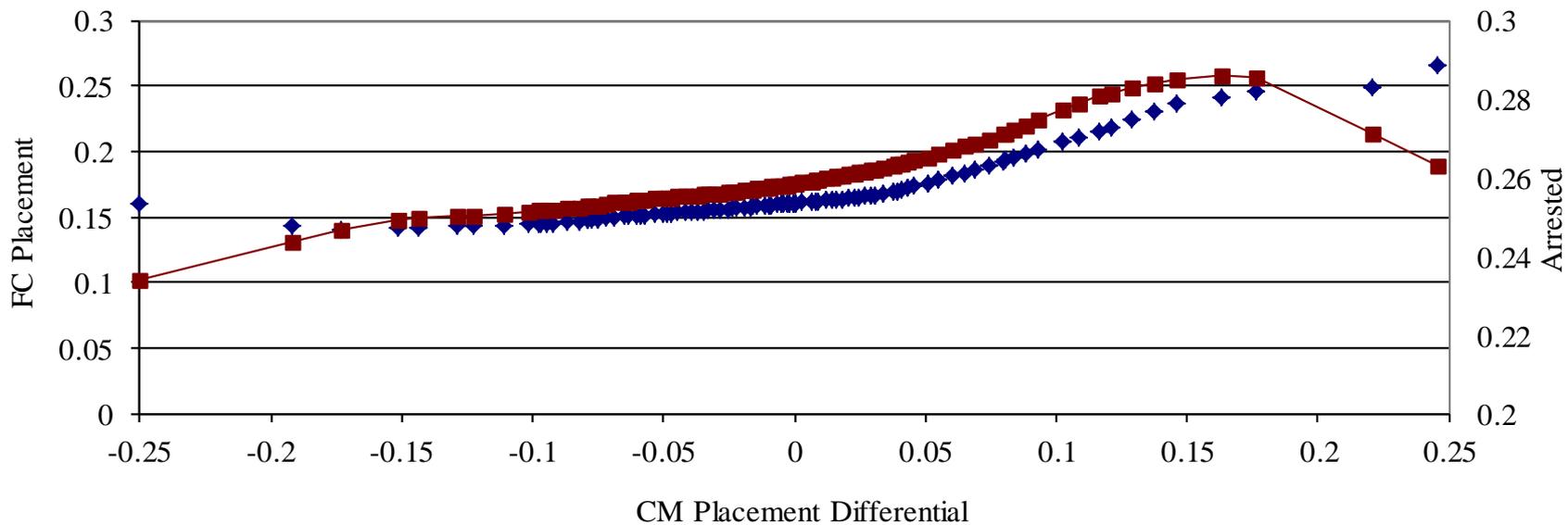


Figure 2A: Arrested vs. P(Placement|Z):
Outside Cook County

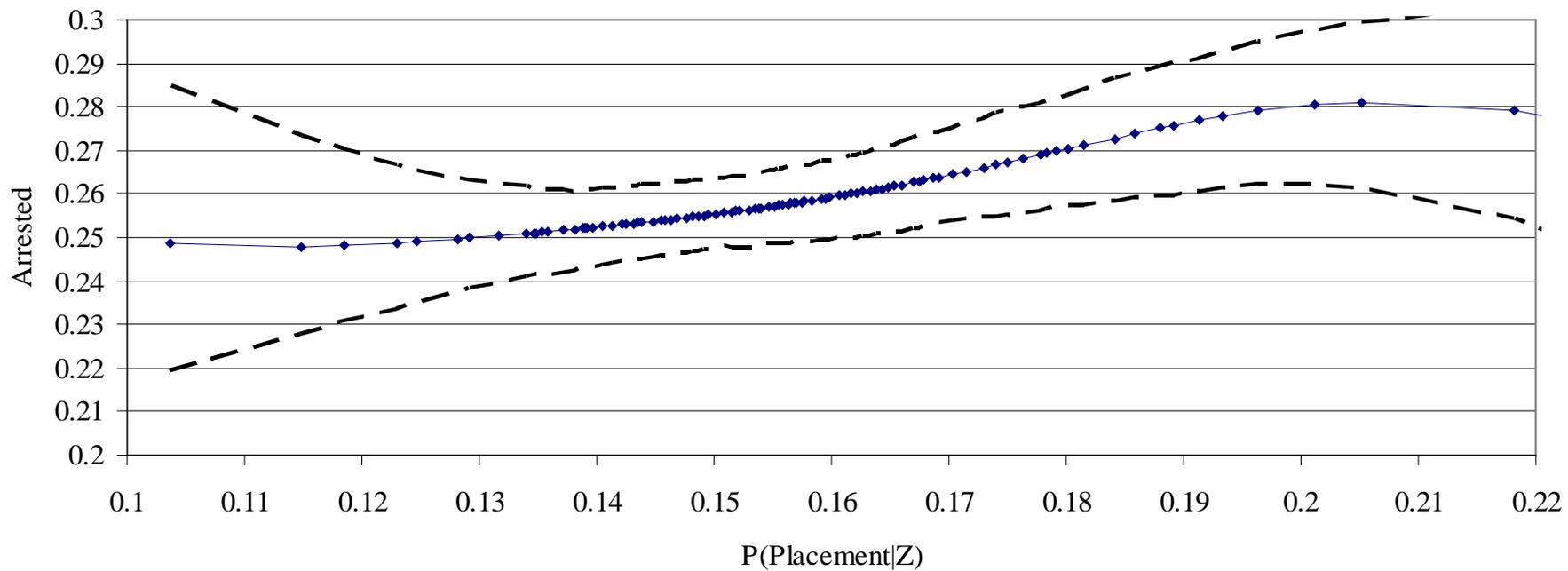


Figure 3A: Delinquency as a function of $P(z)$

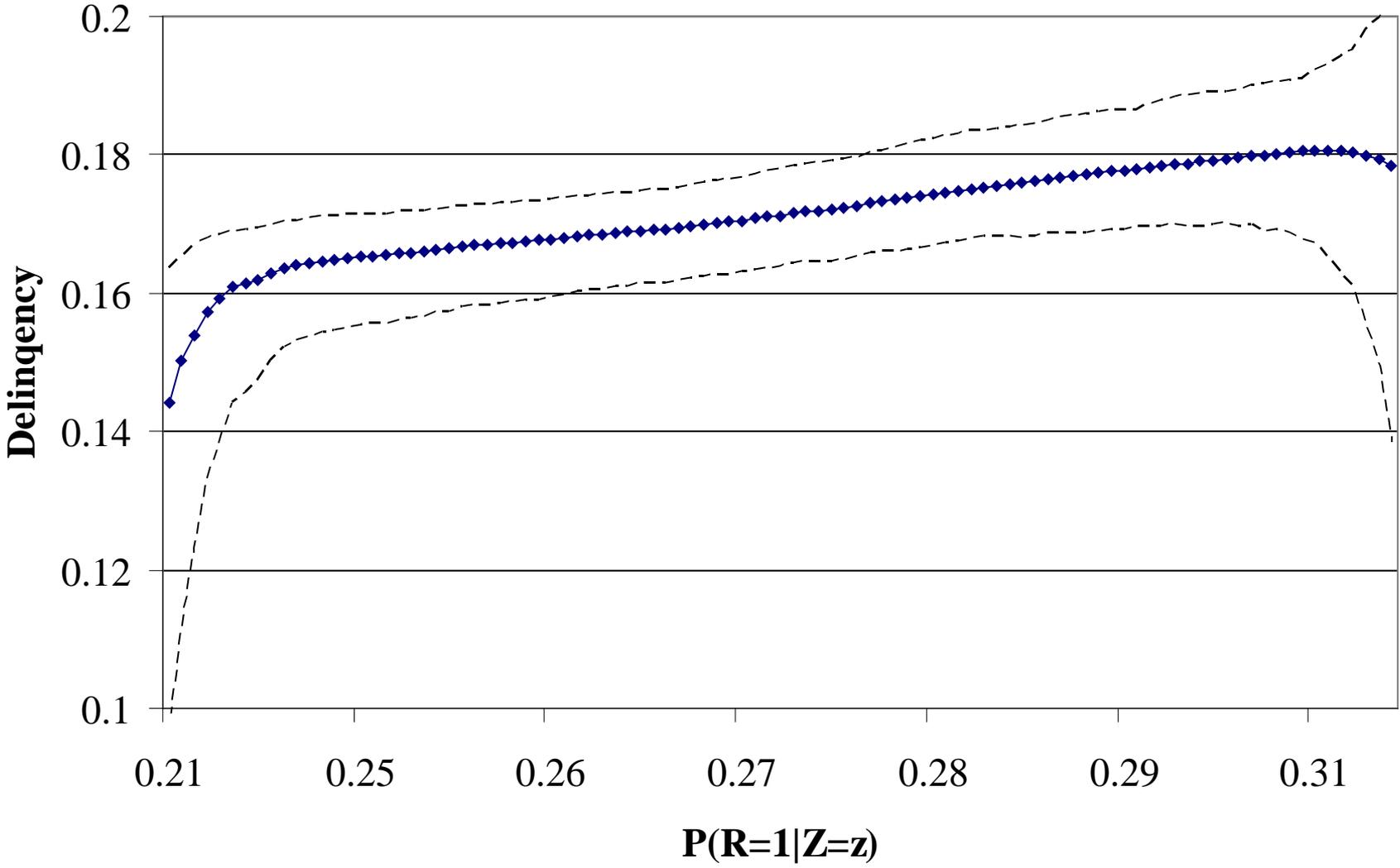


Figure 4A: Teen Motherhood as a function of $P(z)$

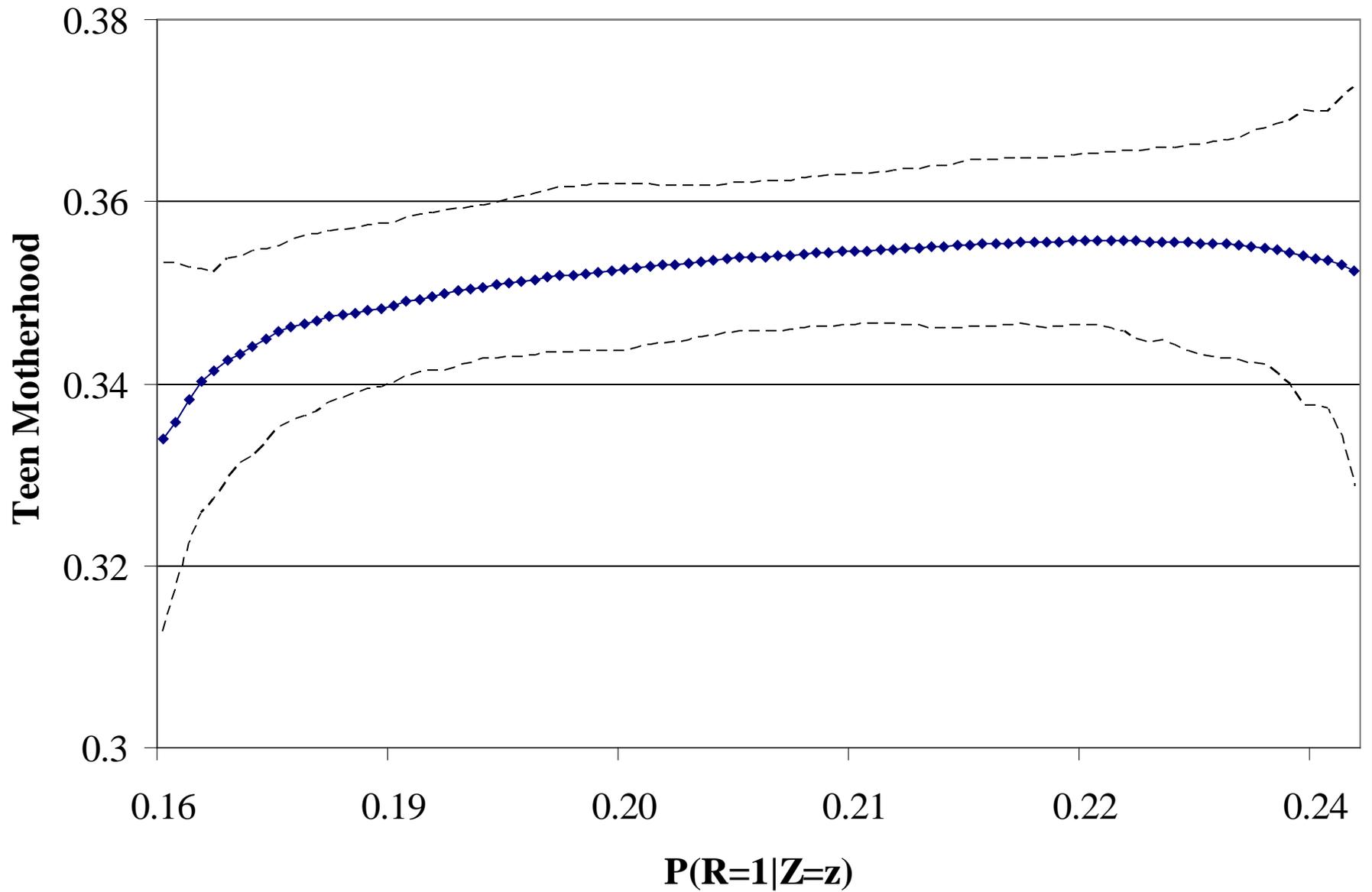
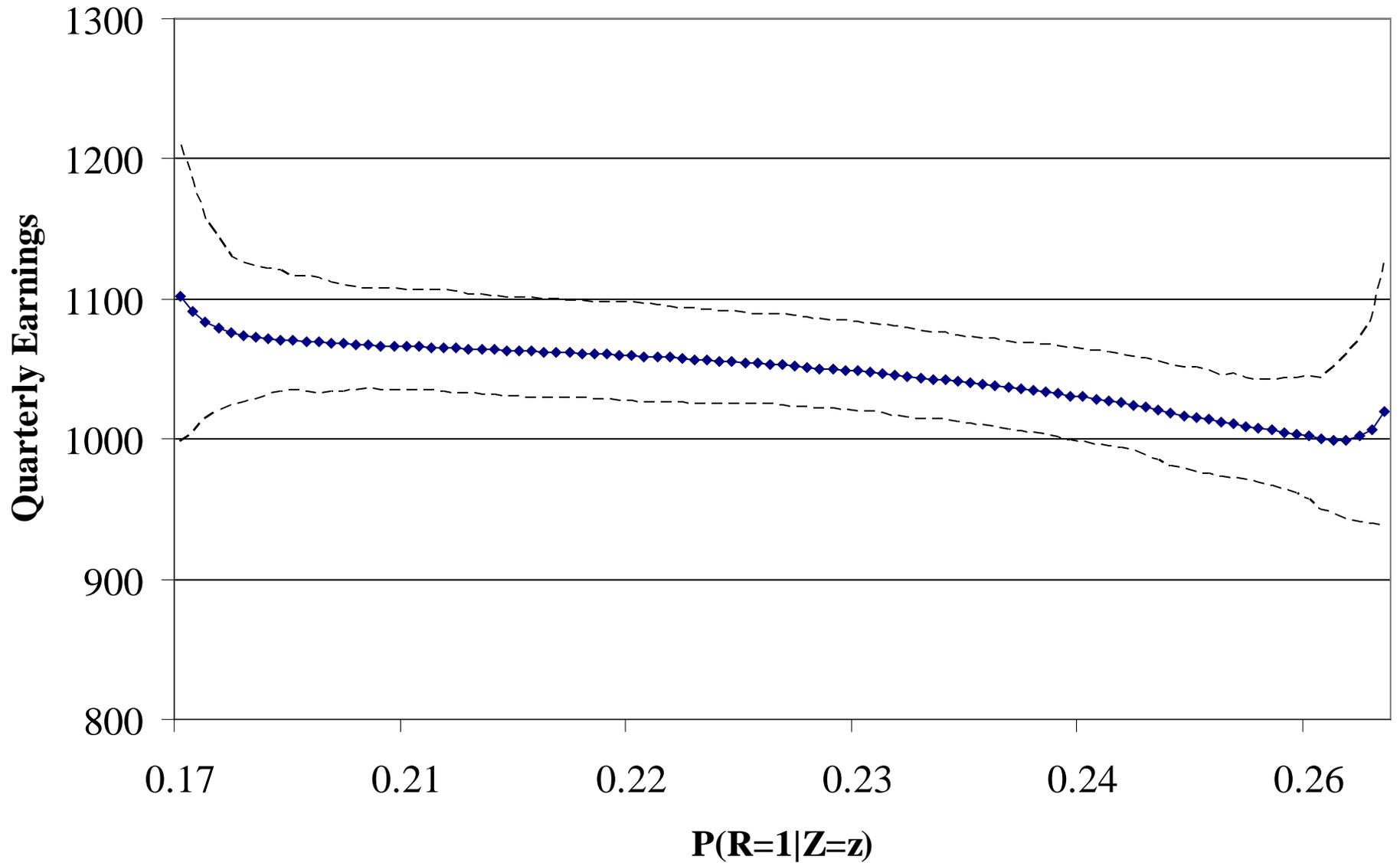


Figure 5A: Earnings as a function of $P(z)$



Summary: Large Effects

Long-term Outcomes

- 3x Higher Arrest Rate
- 3x Higher Delinquency
- 2x Higher Teen Motherhood
- 40% Lower Employment

Childhood Health:

- No Effects for Childhood Burns / Broken Bones
- 3x more likely to receive wellness visit

Types of Cases

Some Evidence that “Marginal Cases” (Larger Negative Effects of Foster Care Placement) are Found for:

- African Americans
- Girls
- Young adolescents (11-13 year olds)
- Victims of Abuse (compared to neglect)

Negative effects found across all groups, however

Limitations

Narrow measures of safety

Outcomes only available for children who remain in Illinois

Illinois in the 1990s vs. TN Today

| Variable: | IL | TN |
|-----------------------------------|-----|----|
| Median Length of Stay (months) | 48 | 12 |
| Kinship placement | 50% | 8% |

Sources: US DHHS; TN DCS Annual Report; CWLA

Additional Outcomes:

Short-term Outcomes

Test Scores (Chicago)

Emergency healthcare

Additional Long-term Outcomes

- Mortality
- Treatment for Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Additional Approaches:

Policy Interventions

e.g. Family preservation services: could roll out different models randomly

Conclusions

- **Investigator Removal Tendencies are Associated w/ Removal in Subsequent Cases**
- **Large Negative Effects of Removal for Marginal Cases**
- **Size of effects suggests caution in interpretation**
- **Taken together: children at the margin of removal perform better when they remain home:**
 - Adult Arrests
 - Delinquency
 - Teen Pregnancy
 - Employment & Earnings

Plan of Talk

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Kinship Foster Care and Child Outcomes:

Measuring the Effects of A Change in Financial Incentives for Relative Caregivers



Are Children Better Off with Relative Foster Care Providers?

Anecdotal Pros (less traumatic) & Cons (providers are parents of abusive/neglectful parents)

Difficult to Answer

- Lack of data
- Homes are Chosen: Not Randomly Assigned

Are Children Better Off with Relative Foster Care Providers?

Idea: Exploit Reform in Illinois Foster Care System

- Wage offer to Relatives of New Foster Care Entrants Drops by 30% in 1995
- Compare Children Investigated Just Before & After
- Rich Data as Before
- Children “Affected by the Natural Experiment”:
Cases Whose Relatives Respond to the Change in the Subsidy Offer

Background

Entry into Foster Care

- Initial Report (police, physician, family...)
- Investigation Office: Looks for Relative First

Illinois: Large Growth in Foster Care System

- 14,000 in 1986; 50,000 in 1995
- Spending increased to over \$1 billion

Background

Illinois Reform: Two-tiered system put in place

Licensed caregivers receive higher payment

Unlicensed: monthly subsidy is ~30% lower
(e.g. 9-year old child: \$410 to \$285 per month)

In practice, few get licensed

- Space requirements and intrusiveness given as reasons.

Figure 1:
Fraction of Foster Children Going to Relatives

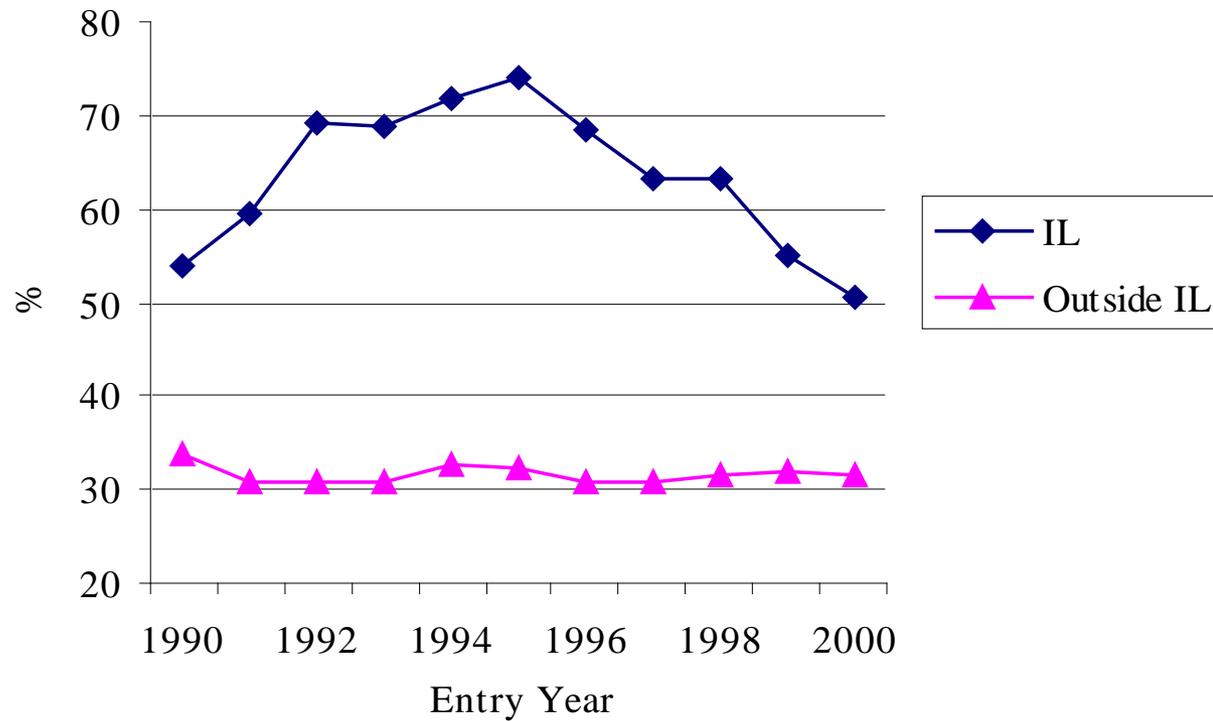
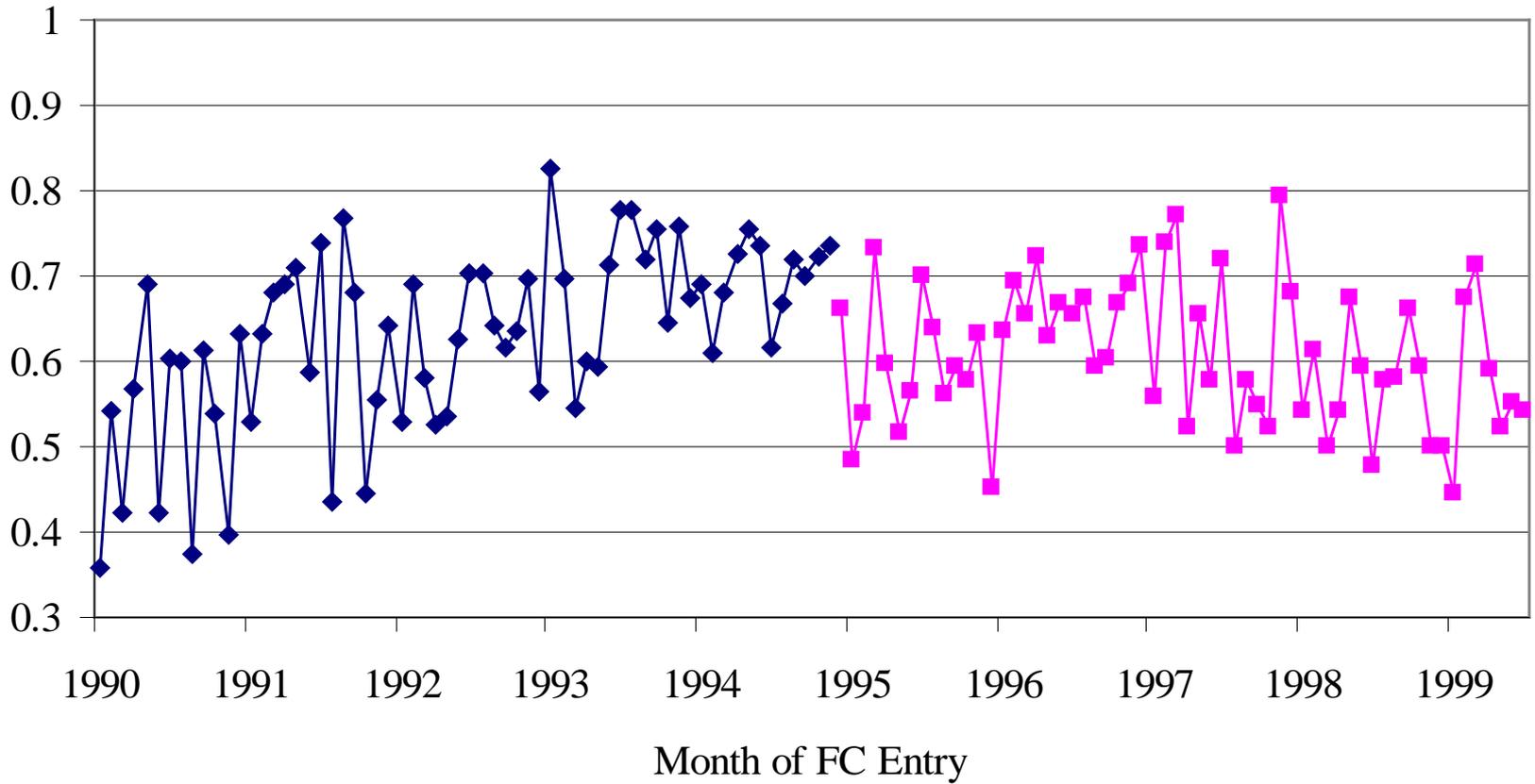


Figure 1A: Foster Children Going to Relatives

◆ Pre-reform ■ Post-reform



Findings

Care of Relatives Does Respond to Subsidy

30% drop in Subsidies \Leftrightarrow Relatives are 20% less likely to provide care even among abuse cases

Response Varies by Child Characteristic

Larger for children requiring mental health services, and children under 10

Limitation: Concurrent Reforms

Admissions of pre-existing informal kinship care no longer allowed

Study: Considered abuse cases, with similar results

Findings on Quality of Care

(Observable) Child Outcomes do not appear to worsen with lower subsidies

- 1-year disruption rate unchanged
- No change in wellness visits; injuries; test scores in Chicago Public Schools

Traditional FC vs. Kinship FC (on the margin)

Selection effect may mitigate income effect

Conclusions

Following a 30% drop in subsidies, relatives are 15-20% less likely to provide care

Children requiring mental health services, and children under 10 saw bigger responses

Lower subsidies did not appear to lower quality.

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Research Conclusions

- **Children “on the margin of placement” in Illinois during 1990s:
Better Outcomes if remained at home**
- **Found across all types, particularly African American children, girls, and young adolescents**
- **Kinship Caregivers “on the margin of providing care” respond to financial incentives and are similar in (observable) quality to non-relative caregivers**

Going Forward

Research in Other States (Replication/Different Settings)

Other “Natural Experiments”

e.g. rolling out new services in a random way

Coupled w/ linked data: outcomes outside foster care

Going Forward

Big Questions in Child Welfare

- 1. What Are the Effects of Foster Care Placement on Child Wellbeing?**
- 2. What Types of Placements Are Best?
Relatives/Non-Relatives/Institutions**
- 3. What do Practitioners Want to Know?**

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