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Making sense of change and stability in looked after children's care placements

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INTRODUCTION

Looked after children with out of home placements may experience **multiple placements** before a stable environment is established for them. As a result, policy changes have aimed to **reduce** the amount of **instability** which looked after children experience. However, our current understanding of care placement stability in Scotland, and how this has changed over time, is limited.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To develop our understanding of placement in stability in Scotland, our project applies **state sequence analysis** (SSA) to **administrative data** on children's care placements from 2008 to 2015 (~75,000 placements and ~19,500 children). SSA is an established method which can **describe developmental processes** which consist of changes between different states - in this case, types of care placement. SSA can be combined with cluster analysis to summarise placement histories into a **groups of children with similar placement sequences**, and offers a number of measures to quantify an individual child's placement type stability.

RESULTS

Figure One shows the results of a **cluster analysis** of sequences for children age 2-3 who were looked after in Scotland between 1st January 2008 and 31st July 2015.

FIGURE ONE: State distribution plot of care placement types by placement type cluster, children looked after in Scotland age 2-3 (2008-2015)

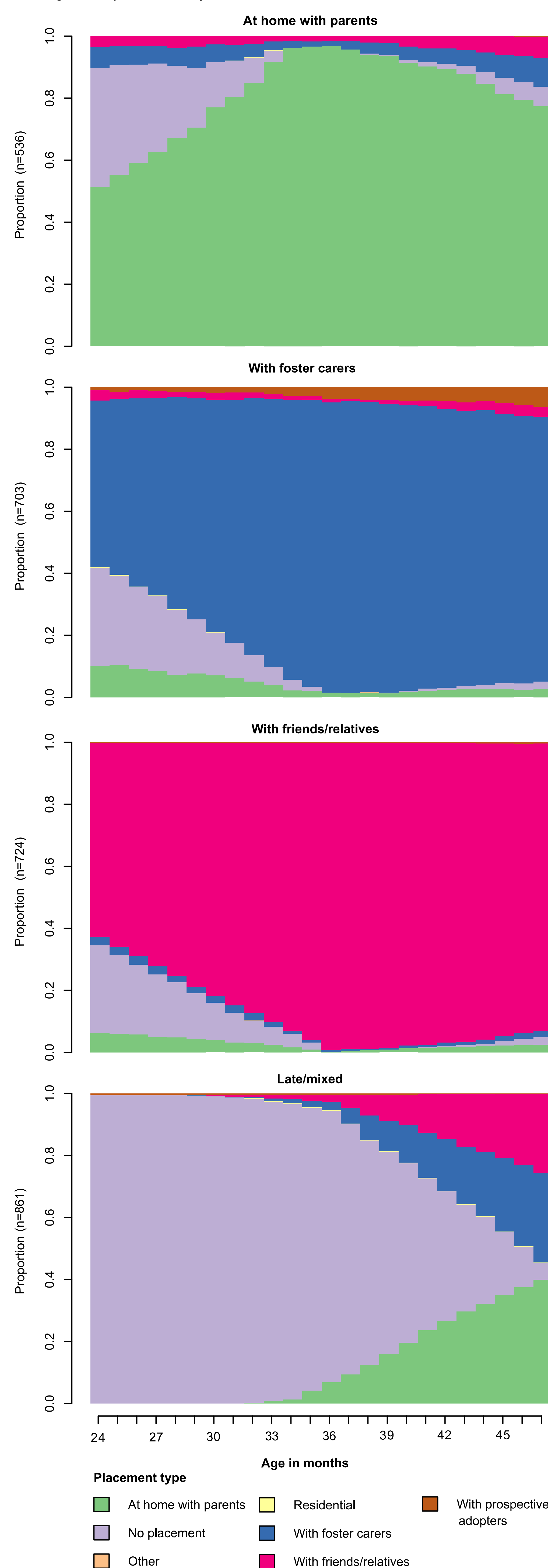
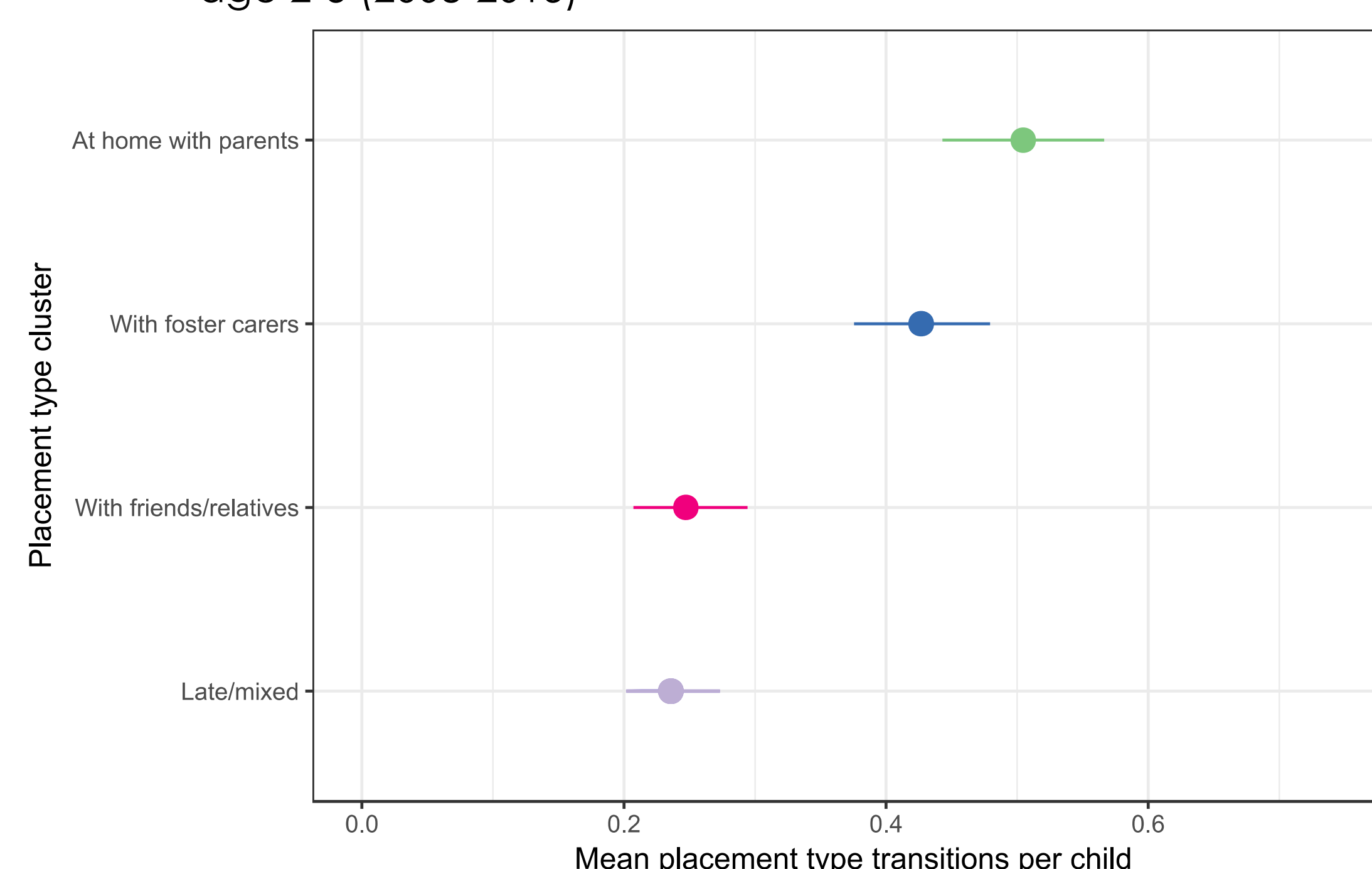


FIGURE TWO: Mean number of placement type transitions by placement type cluster, children looked after in Scotland age 2-3 (2008-2015)



RESULTS CONT'D

Each plot shows the proportion of children in different placements in each month of the 24 month period between their 2nd and 4th birthdays, with each placement type shown in a different colour. The cluster analysis produced **four groups** (and so there are four plots), three of which were dominated by placement type - at home with parents, with foster carers, with friends/relatives - and one which was characterized by when the child began to be looked after - late/mixed.

Figure Two shows the average number of transitions between placement types for each child in the different cluster groups. The **overall picture** is one of **stability**, with all clusters having an average of less than one transition between placement types. This measure can compare between groups: the at home with parents and with foster carer groups have around 0.2 more placement type transitions than the with friends/relatives group.

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

These results illustrate how SSA can be used to understand children's care placement type stability. Our project will use these data and methods to examine how placement type stability has **changed over time** for different cohorts of looked after children aged 0-16.

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