



## ABSTRACT

Transitional-aged foster care youth face a high risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system. The purpose of the present study was to examine any difference in records of arrests among transitional-aged foster youth in relation to their experienced closeness with a parental figure. Study data was gathered from a secondary analysis of the data obtained from the Midwest Study, a longitudinal panel study occurring across three waves from 2002 to 2007 in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. The sample consisted of n=732 transitional age youth between ages 17-18 and 24. This study used the Mann-Whitney U Test to analyze any significant differences in arrests for experienced maternal closeness, paternal closeness, or caregiver closeness. Results revealed that caregiver closeness scores for participants who did not have an official arrest record were significantly higher than the caregiver closeness scores for participants who did have an official arrest record. The closeness scores for the maternal and paternal figures were not found to be significantly related to official arrest records among study participants. Future research on this topic should delve deeper into understanding the role of foster care youth experienced closeness with a caregiver parental figure and how this relationship is associated with their criminal activity and arrests.

## INTRODUCTION

### Significance of Study:

- Studies show that foster care adolescents who “age-out” from the foster care system experience higher rates of arrests in comparison to their same-aged peers within the general population (Cusick et al., 2012).
- 57% of males and 34% of females in foster care, compared to only 20% of males and 3% of females within the general population, report an arrest by their 19th birthday. Approximately 50% of youth who age-out of foster care experience an arrest at some point after their transition (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Prison and homeless population demographics also reveal that approximately 20% of prison inmates and 28% of homeless persons were placed in foster care as youth (Burt et al., 1999, as cited in Doyle, 2008).
- Research consistently shows that youth exiting foster care experience poor relations with both their biological and foster families (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2010, as cited in Barth et al., 2010). Youth impacted by poor familial support are found to develop a trajectory of delinquent behavior (Barth et al., 2010). However, it has been minimally researched how foster care youth relate with their parental figures and how these relationships are associated to their criminal activity.

### Purpose of Study:

The purpose of the current study is to add to the body of literature related to foster youth and criminal activity. The aim of this study is to examine foster youth delinquent behavior and arrest records in relation to having a close relationship with a parental figure.

### Research Question:

Is there a difference in experienced closeness with a parental figure based on arrest records among transitional age foster care youth?

### Hypothesis:

For this study, it is hypothesized that higher levels of reported closeness with a parental figure will be associated with lower levels of arrest records among transitional age foster care youth.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Frameworks

- **Attachment Theory: Secure Base** - used to understand the foster youth experience in long-term care through the five dimensions of the caregiving secure base model that include acceptance, availability, sensitivity, co-operation, and family membership (Schofield, 2008, as cited in Schofield & Beek, 2009).
- **Social Bonding Theory** - used to conceptualize delinquent behavior as a result of a damaged bond to society. These social bonds include attachment to others, engagement in routine activities, dedication to conventional institutions, and alignment with conventional values and norms.
- **General Strain Theory (GST)** - used to understand specific forms of strain that are more likely to influence outcomes of crime among foster care youth, including: unstable placements, time in care, exclusion from school, and unemployment (Barn & Tan, 2012).

### Social Support for Foster Care Youth

The studies show mixed findings in that some foster youth report a lack of connection or bond (i.e., sense of belonging, genuine interest, boundaries and structure, guidance) from their caregivers (Storer et al., 2014). Others perceive a mismatch, lack of fit, and judgment and reactivity toward youth. However, other studies show that youth reported positive relationships with caregivers that included negotiation and compromise, reciprocity in listening to and understanding each other, and a sense of humor and openness in decision-making.

### Social Support Impact on Youth Criminal Behavior

High quality relationships with mother or father figures, school links, and neighborhood efficiency are correlated with lower amounts of violent offenses; however, there is no difference found in the protectiveness for those with maltreatment (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

### Gaps in Research

Existing research studies have only explored the descriptive bond between foster youth and caregivers, limiting the research on the relationship or impact of such bonds with caregivers on their delinquent behaviors.

### Mann-Whitney U test's

- Maternal closeness scores for participants who did not have an official arrest record did not significantly differ from the maternal closeness scores for participants who did have an official arrest record ( $U=59,802, p=.502$ ).
- Paternal closeness scores for participants who did not have an official arrest record did not significantly differ from the paternal closeness scores for participants who did have an official arrest record ( $U=58,503, p=.868$ ).
- Caregiver closeness scores for participants who did not have an official arrest record ( $Mean\ rank=380.35$ ) were **significantly higher** than the caregiver closeness scores for participants who did have an official arrest record ( $Mean\ rank=346.11; U=59,686.5, p<.05$ ).



## METHODS

### Research Design

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the data obtained from the study Crime During the Transition to Adulthood: How Youth Fare as They Leave Out-of-Home Care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, 2002-2007. The original study collected data from two sources: (1) the Midwest study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), and (2) from the official arrest records in every state of the study.
- Survey data was gathered through in-person interviews and official arrests records from every state participating in the study.
- A total of 732 participants responded to a minimum of one of the three waves and participated in at least one in-person interview. Part of the survey was administered utilizing Audio Computer Aided Self Interviewing (ACASI).

### Sampling Method

- The sample consisted of n=732 transitional age youth between ages 17-18 and 24. Youth who were in out-of-home care for at least one year before turning 17 years old were eligible to be recruited for the original study. The reasons for the out-of-home placement had to be due to any form of abuse or neglect, and not due to delinquency.
- Randomized sampling was used to select study participants from the population who met the basic criteria in Illinois. For the states of Iowa and Wisconsin, all youth in out-of-home care who met these basic criteria were included in the study.

### Measures

- **Closeness with a parental figure** was measured by a maternal closeness scale, paternal closeness scale, and caregiver closeness scale. Each of these scales coded the level of closeness with the following potential response items: “1=not close; 2=not very close; 3=somewhat close; 4=very close.”
- **Criminal Behavior** was measured by using official arrest records for all three waves at each state of the study.

## RESULTS

### Table

Parental Closeness Difference Between Participants with Official Arrest Record and without an

### Official Arrest Record

Variable	Official Arrest Record		U	p
	Yes	No		
	Mean rank	Mean rank		
Parental closeness with:				
Maternal figure	357.85	347.96	59,802	.502
Paternal figure	346.28	343.93	58,503	.868
Caregivers	346.11	380.35	59,686.5	<.05

## CONCLUSION

- First, a sense of closeness with caregivers in those who did not have an official arrest record was significantly higher than those who did have an official arrest record.
- The foster family plays a critical role in the lives of foster youth as they make their transition toward adulthood (Schofield & Beek, 2009). Thus, the first study finding can be interpreted in that foster care youth who experience closeness to a caregiver feel more supported and are more likely to have a positive transition to adulthood, and less likely to engage in criminal activity that can lead to arrests.
- Second, unlike the study hypothesis, this study did not find significant relationships between the sense of closeness with maternal and paternal figures and delinquent behaviors. Both maternal and paternal closeness were not found to be related to official arrest records among the youth aging out of foster care.
- Research demonstrates that youth who are impacted by poor familial support develop a trajectory of delinquent behavior (Barth et al., 2010). Thus, it is likely that participants of this study were negatively affected by their poor familial support.
- Research on the relationship between foster care youth experienced closeness with a parental figure and arrest records is still a minimally researched topic. This study assessed foster care youth experienced closeness with any of three potential parental figures and found significant findings specific to caregiver figures. Thus, future research on this topic should delve deeper into understanding the role of caregiver figures and how their closeness to foster youth is associated with foster youth criminal activity and arrests.

**Strength and Limitation:** A study strength is that data from official arrest records was used versus data solely based on self-reports from the youth. A limitation is that closeness with a parental figure was assessed by foster youth reports, however, parental figures were not considered in their report of experienced closeness.

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