

# What are the effects of out-of-home care experiences and risky behaviors among foster youth transitioning to adulthood?



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## ABSTRACT

Despite the research and interventions that already exist that target negative out-of-home care experiences among transitioning youth and their involvement in the criminal justice system and engagement in risky behaviors, negative out-of-home care experiences among youth continue to pose a threat to their future outcomes. The primary purpose of the current study was to examine out-of-home care experiences and risky behavior and involvement within the criminal justice system in foster youth transitioning from out-of-home care into adulthood. The present study uses secondary data from the Midwest study. The Midwest study acquired its data from two sources including survey data from the Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth and official arrest records. The sample of participants included 732 youth who lived in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin in which they met the basic criteria for the study. The results of the inferential analysis indicated that most of the relationships between out-of-home care experiences such as caregiver closeness and absence of parental figures and criminal involvement or risky behaviors were not significant. However, four of the relationships between caregiver closeness and criminal involvement/risky behaviors were significant. Therefore, part of this study's hypotheses were supported such as low caregiver closeness on some level increasing the likelihood of foster youth transitioning to adulthood experiencing criminal involvement and experiencing risky behaviors. The present study's findings suggest that it is important to consider negative out-of-home care experiences such as low caregiver closeness among transitioning youth and their increased risk of involvement in the criminal justice system and engagement in risky behaviors as a result.

## INTRODUCTION

### SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY:

- As foster youth exit the foster care system and transition into adulthood, their experiences while in out-of-home care can greatly impact their involvement with risky behaviors or involvement in the criminal justice system.
- There are various factors that can affect the likelihood of participating in risky behaviors or involvement in the criminal justice system with transitioning youth. Some of these factors include caregiver support and caregiver closeness, placement instability, type of placement, as well as experiencing maltreatment while in foster care.

### PURPOSE OF STUDY:

- The aim of this study is to examine the out-of-home care experiences of foster youth transitioning into adulthood and their increased risk of being involved in risky behaviors and the criminal justice system.

### RESEARCH QUESTION:

- What are the effects of out-of-home care experiences and risky behaviors among foster youth transitioning to adulthood?

### HYPOTHESES:

- Foster youth transitioning into adulthood who have had negative out-of-home care experiences and have low caregiver closeness and social support have a higher likelihood of being involved in risky or criminal behaviors

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- Foster youth aging out of the foster care system report higher levels of involvement with delinquent behavior and the legal system that includes arrests, convictions and incarceration as a juvenile and have a higher likelihood of participating in criminal behavior and being involved with the legal system into adulthood
- Foster youth aging out of the system often times have histories with family instability, exposure to childhood trauma, and poverty that puts them at an increased risk when aging out of the system
- Out-of-home care experiences were also associated with an increased likelihood of committing a crime as an adult

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

- The Midwest Study was a longitudinal study that was in collaboration with state public child welfare agencies in the states of Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Chaplin Hall at the University of Chicago, and the University of Washington.
- The current study is a secondary data cross-sectional quantitative study that makes use of data gathered in Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth.
- The Midwest Study survey data were acquired directly from the sample of youth for two sequential years over a span of three waves that took place between May 2002 and January 2007. However, the current study only utilized data from Wave 1 of the original study.
- There was a total of 732 youth who participated in at least one in-person interview over the course of all three waves.

### Sample

- The participants from the Midwest Study were youth who lived in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin in which they met the basic criteria and were able to be included in the original sample.
- Out of the 767 youth who made up the overall sample, a total of 732 Wave 1 interviews were conducted which produced a response rate of 95.4%.
- In the current study, the data was obtained from the entire original sample in Wave 1 of the original study which were a total of 732 participants.
- The study was comprised of 51.9%, and 48.1% of males. The age at first entry into foster care was 48.5% who reported that they were less than 12, and 51.5% who reported that they were 12 or older. Racial composition and origin of the sample was composed of participants who identified as Hispanic (8.6%), White (30.9%), Black and/or African American (57%), and being of another race (12.2%).

### Measures

- In the current study, 6 delinquency and crime variables were utilized from the Midwest Study which served as the dependent variables.
- The out-of-home care experiences variables included measures that follow the youth's experience within the child welfare system. These include age at time of their first placement, the total number of placements while in foster care, and type of placements at the Wave 1 survey (foster care, kinship care, group care, and independent living or other care). The social bonds variables included measures of both maternal and paternal and foster caregiver attachment, and two variables that involved whether or not the participant had a mother or father present in their life. These served as the independent variables.
- All variables were measured using a self-report questionnaire and involved Likert Scales as well as Yes or No questions.

## RESULTS

### Chi-square Test (Craemer's V)

- A Chi-square Test (Craemer's V) was conducted in order to test the relationship between out-of-home care experiences (e.g., caregiver closeness, and presence of parental figures) and criminal involvement/risky behaviors and provided inferential analysis data.
- The relationship between caregiver closeness and having ever been arrested was examined. A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(3) = 13.4, p < .01$ ), while a Cramer's V statistic suggested a weak relationship (.18). The majority of participants with low caregiver closeness who reported "not close" were more likely to have ever been arrested (64.7%) versus those who reported "very close" (43%). In contrast, those who had high caregiver closeness were more likely to have not ever been arrested. The majority (57%) of participants who reported "very close" also reported not ever being arrested.

- A Chi-square test was calculated comparing the frequency of caregiver closeness and having ever sold marijuana or other drugs. A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(3) = 9.85, p < .05$ ), while a Cramer's V statistic suggested a weak relationship (.12). The majority of participants with high caregiver closeness who reported "very close" were more likely to have never sold marijuana or other drugs (83.8%) versus those who reported "not close" (72.5%).
- A Chi-square test was calculated comparing the frequency of caregiver closeness and having ever shot or stabbed someone. A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(3) = 13.39, p < .01$ ), while a Cramer's V statistic suggested a weak relationship (.14). The majority of participants with high caregiver closeness who reported "very close" were more likely to have never shot or stab someone (97.2%) similarly to those who reported "not close" (90.2%). Those who reported low caregiver closeness were more likely to have ever shot or stabbed someone versus those who reported high caregiver closeness.
- A Chi-square test was calculated comparing the frequency of caregiver closeness and having committed any nonviolent offense. A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(3) = 10.04, p < .05$ ), while a Cramer's V statistic suggested a weak relationship (.15). The majority of participants with high caregiver closeness who reported "very close" were more likely to have never committed any nonviolent offense (58.3%) versus those who reported "not close" (42.5%). Those who reported low caregiver closeness were more likely to have commit any nonviolent offense versus those who reported high caregiver closeness.

Table 3

Caregiver Closeness and Having Ever Been Arrested |

	Ever been arrested			
	No		Yes	
Caregiver closeness	n	%	n	%
Not close	54	35.3	99	64.7
Not very close	14	42.4	19	57.6
Somewhat close	84	45.2	102	54.8
Very close	204	57	154	43

## DISCUSSION

### Strengths and Limitations:

- One of the present study's strengths is the use of a large sample taken from more than one source rather than just one.
- Another strength is the use of multiple independent and dependent variables in order to study multiple areas in order to analyze the various ways in which transitioning youth are impacted and the different factors that are associated with their involvement in risky behaviors and the criminal justice system.
- A limitation was also conducted in three states within the Mid-West which can limit the generalizability of the study's findings to foster youth transitioning to adulthood that are in other areas of the United States.
- Another limitation is that the majority of the sample was composed of Black or African American participants, and therefore the study lacks generalizability in participants of different racial and ethnic backgrounds due to a disproportionate number of participants of the same race/ethnicity.

### Implications for Research and Practice

- The current study's findings are important for social work practice because it conveys that relationships between caregivers and youth can have a significant impact on their future outcomes and put them at an increased risk for engaging in risky behaviors as well as being involved in the criminal justice system.
- Future studies should examine other relationships between youth and caregivers such as their relationships with their social workers, probation officers, psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists, etc., as many foster youth get their support and caregiver closeness from these individuals while they are in care.