

The Relationship Between Social Bonds and Educational and Employment Outcomes Among Former Foster Children

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ABSTRACT

Childhood foster care experience has been understood to correlate with various negative outcomes in adulthood. The current study examined the educational and employment outcomes among former foster children and their relationship to various social bonds. This study was a secondary analysis of data from the Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth. Data was collected over three (3) waves utilizing self-report questionnaires. The sample was composed of 732 former foster children ages 17 to 18 at wave one (1), and 590 participants age 21 at wave three (3). Social bonds were measured at wave one (1) through the Medical Outcomes Study Social Support Survey and three scaled questions aimed at examining a participant's relationships. Educational and employment success were measured at wave three (3) by two questions—one that assessed enrollment in school and one that assessed employment. A series of Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted. Results from the Mann-Whitney U tests indicated that participants with higher levels of maternal closeness were less likely to be employed at wave three (3). However, there was no significant relationship between employment outcomes between participants' paternal closeness, caregiver closeness, or social support. There were also no significant differences in educational outcomes based on participants' maternal closeness, paternal closeness, caregiver closeness, or social support. Future research is needed to further explore what variables impact employment and educational outcomes among former foster children.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the study

- Only 3 to 10% of foster children obtain their bachelor's degree.
- Foster children are at an increased risk for unemployment and homelessness.
- Social workers play important roles in addressing the needs of foster children as they move through the child welfare system.

Research Question

- What is the impact of social bonds on educational and employment outcomes among foster children?

Hypothesis

- Among foster children, there is a positive relationship between social bonds and educational outcomes, as well as between social bonds and employment outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework: Ecological Systems

- Development and functioning are influenced by one's interactive environments, including social and cultural influences.
- Foster children face challenges in their microsystem (e.g. family, friends, placements, school) and mesosystem (i.e. interactions within microsystem).

Foster Care Experiences and Outcomes

- Foster children experience challenges including inadequate parenting, familial substance abuse, and placement changes in home and school settings.
- Studies suggest that foster children face challenges with maintaining social bonds, which may hinder social development.
- Despite the common desire to attend college among former foster children, most do not obtain a college degree.
- Former foster children are more likely to be unemployed, have unstable employment, and/or have low earnings.
- Barriers to educational attainment include unfamiliarity with college, social stressors, and lack of tangible support.
- Social support has been found to be a protective factor for educational and employment success.

Gaps and Limitations

- There is little research on the role that social bonds play in the educational and employment outcomes of foster children.

METHODS

Research Design

- The present study is a secondary analysis of data from the Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth.
- The original study gathered data over three waves from 2002 to 2007, with each wave approximately two years apart.
- The original study used a survey design and interviews to gather data from former foster children.
- The present study utilizes data gathered from individual interviews administered at wave one (1) and wave three (3).
- Data was gathered through computer-assisted and in-person interviews.

Measures

Independent Variables - The independent variables for this study were gathered from wave one (1) and include the following:

- Level of closeness to maternal figures
- Level of closeness to parental figures
- Level of closeness to caregivers
- Level of social support

Sampling Method

- The sample was recruited by public child welfare organizations and two universities in the states of Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin.
- In Illinois, random sampling was used to select participants who represented two-thirds of the eligible population.
- In Iowa and Wisconsin, purposive sampling was used and all youths who met eligibility criteria were selected.
- Participants turned 17 in foster care, lived in foster care for 1+ years before turning 17, and were removed due to child abuse or neglect.
- Wave 1 had 732 participants ages 17 to 18.
- Wave 3 had 590 remaining participants, interviewed at 21 years old.

Dependent Variables - The dependent variables for this study were gathered from wave three (3) and include the following:

- Enrollment in school at wave three (3)
- Employment status at wave three (3)

RESULTS

Difference in Employment Between Former Foster Children with and without Different Types of Social Support

Variables	Mean rank	U	p
Maternal Closeness		15,815.5	.015
Yes	206.75		
No	235.07		
Paternal Closeness		20,995.0	.467
Yes	208.55		
No	216.71		
Caregiver Closeness		25,423.0	.126
Yes	227.01		
No	209.69		
Social Support		24,220.5	.615
Yes	222.16		
No	216.02		

Sample Characteristics (N=732)

Characteristic	f	%
Gender		
Male	352	48.1%
Female	380	51.9%
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic	63	8.6%
White	226	30.9%
Black	417	57.0%
Other	89	12.2%
Age at first entry into foster care		
Less than 12	355	48.5%
12 and older	377	51.5%
Total number of foster care and group home placements at wave 1		
Less than 5 placements	403	55.4%
5 or more placements	324	44.6%
Placement type		
In foster care at wave 1	262	35.8%
In kinship care at wave 1	223	30.5%
In group care at wave 1	132	18.0%
In independent or other care at wave 1	115	15.7%
Living children at wave 1		
Yes	102	14.0%
No	624	86.0%

DISCUSSION

Key Findings

- Maternal closeness was positively correlated with unemployment among former foster children, which was unexpected and contradicts the existing literature.
- Three of the measures of social bonds (i.e., paternal closeness, caregiver closeness, and social support) had no significant relationship with employment outcomes among former foster children.
- All measures of social bonds in the present study (i.e., maternal closeness, paternal closeness, caregiver closeness, and social support) had no significant relationship with educational outcomes among former foster children.

Strengths

- The present study addresses the gap in literature of the relationship between social bonds and educational/employment outcomes among foster children.
- The present study utilizes a longitudinal design, which allows for the assessment of changes experienced by participants over time.

Limitations

- The sample size decreased over time due to participants dropping out of the study, which is a common occurrence for longitudinal studies.
- The study utilized self-report data, which makes social-desirability bias a potential threat to validity.
- The dataset used for the present study did not reveal all study measures from the original dataset, so there was limited information available to measure educational and employment success.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

Research

- Future research should further explore the factors that influence educational and employment outcomes among former foster children.

Practice

- Former foster children should be connected to resources including mental health services that aim to increase self-determination, formal supports, financial advisors, tutors, financial waivers, and various trainings on how to navigate the postsecondary education system.
- Postsecondary personnel should receive training to increase awareness of the various needs of former foster children.
- Social workers should work to reduce placement moves of foster children.
- Child welfare support and foster care should be offered to former foster children throughout their 20s.

Policy

- Policy should be implemented for former foster children to begin receiving information of their postsecondary education and employment options beginning in their childhood years.
- Policy should be implemented to increase the accessibility and availability of waivers for various types of education

Conclusion

- Overall, the present study found no correlation between social bonds and educational success among former foster children.
- Surprisingly, the present study found that former foster children with higher levels of maternal closeness had lower employment rates over time.
- Future research is needed to identify the risk factors of poor educational and employment success among former foster children.