Crime during the Transition to Adulthood

How Youth Fare as They Leave Out-of-Home Care

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DRAFT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the transition to adulthood has arguably become a more ambiguous and complex period for all youth (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten, 2005), it may be particularly difficult for youth aging out of the child welfare system. Whereas many youth move gradually toward independent adulthood, foster youth "aging out" of care lose the support of the child welfare system when they reach a particular age of majority, during a period when they may be particularly at risk for engagement in crime.

In this study, we examine criminal behavior and criminal justice system involvement among youth making the transition from out-of-home care to independent adulthood. We consider the importance of experiences within the child welfare system on criminal behavior during the transition to adulthood. In addition, we examine whether social bonds predict criminal behavior and the risk for criminal justice involvement among former foster youth. The following research questions are addressed.

1) Are offending patterns during the early transition to adulthood (ages 17-22) among youth formerly in out-of-home care different from those of the general population?

2) Do experiences in out-of-home care, including number of placements, placement type, age at entry, and receipt of independent living services predict later criminal behavior or criminal justice involvement during the transition to adulthood among youth aging out of the child welfare system? Is the relationship between out-of-home care experiences and crime moderated by race?

3) Above and beyond prior experiences with maltreatment and within the child welfare system, do the bonds to parents or caregivers, education, or employment that foster youth have as they approach the transition to adulthood predict later criminal behavior or criminal justice involvement?

Data

Data for this project come from The Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), which is a longitudinal panel study that is part of a collaborative effort of the state public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, and the University of Washington. Youth who met the following basic criteria were eligible for inclusion in the original sample: (1) they reached the age of 17 years old while in out-of-home care, (2) they had been in care for at least one year prior to their 17th birthday, and 3) they were placed in out-of-home care for reasons of abuse or neglect rather than delinquency. A group of 767 youths who met the sample selection criteria was identified. Survey data were collected directly from the youth every two years over three waves, starting in May 2002. At Wave 1 we completed 732 interviews, at which time youth were between the ages of 17 and 18. At Wave 2, 603 youth were interviewed and at Wave 3, 590 were interviewed. To supplement the survey data, we accessed official arrest data from each state to measure criminal arrests that occurred between respondents' Wave 1 interview and August 31, 2007, by which time all of the study participants were at least 21 years old. Official arrest information was obtained for 728 of the original 732 sample.[1]

Findings

Patterns of Offending

To address the first research question, which asks whether offending patterns during the early transition to adulthood (ages 17-22) among youth formerly in out-of-

[1] Four respondents did not provide permission to access administrative records.

home care are different from those of the general population, we first compared self reported offending among foster youth in the Midwest Study at each of the three waves to same aged peers from in a national survey, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health[2], or Add Health.[3] We examined behaviors that ranged from minor property offenses, such as taking something from a store worth less than $50 to serious acts of violence, such as such using or threatening to use a weapon to get something from someone and shooting or stabbing someone. Using independent samples t-tests to compare the proportions, we found that a significantly higher proportion of the foster youth from the Midwest Study reported engaging in each offense at Wave 1, which represents offenses committed when youth were about 16-17 years old. For most offenses, the proportion of youth in the Midwest Study engaging in each offense was at least twice that found in the Add Health study.

We found fewer differences in offending between foster youth and their Add Health peers as reported at age 19 than found two years earlier[4]. Offending at this point was lower in general for both foster youth and youth in general than offending at ages 16-17. Yet unlike the comparisons made during late adolescence, few offenses differed by

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[2] This research uses data from Add Health, a program project designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris, and funded by a grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 17 other agencies. Special acknowledgment is due Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Persons interested in obtaining data files from Add Health should contact Add Health, Carolina Population Center, 123 W. Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-2524 (addhealth@unc.edu). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis

[3] The Midwest Study and the Add Health study had significantly different racial distributions at each of the time points, with the Midwest Study being represented by a higher proportion of African American and multiracial respondents. In order to account for differences in the racial distributions of the two samples, we computed a race case weight for youth in the Add Health sample.

[4] An examination of those who remained in the Midwest study over the 3 waves and those who dropped out suggests study attrition did not result in the selective loss of those displaying the worst behavior

more than two to three percent across the two groups. Foster youth were significantly more likely to engage in some violent offenses, with nearly a quarter participating in a group fight and six percent having pulled a knife or gun on someone. By wave 3, when respondents were 21-22 years old, we found even fewer differences between foster youth and their peers more generally. The only significant differences between the two samples were for damaging property, going into a house to steal something, and pulling a knife or gun on someone, with foster youth reporting these behaviors more frequently.

Large differences across the two groups are seen, however, when comparing self reported arrests by age 19 and since age 18. A significantly higher proportion of foster youth reported having ever been arrested by age 19 and having been arrested since age 18 when compared to Add Health youth. This is true for both males and females. For arrests since age 18, we found even larger differences between the Midwest and Add Health studies. Even more striking, the percentage of female foster youth ever experiencing an arrest was not only higher than females in the Add Health sample, but also higher than that for Add Health males.

These findings suggest that like their peers more generally, offending among foster youth tends to decline during the early transition to adulthood. In comparing self-reporting offending among Midwest Study respondents who completed all three interviews, we found that offending generally decreased from one time point to the next. Exceptions included damaging property and stealing something worth more than $50, in which we found no significant declines as reported between age 17-18 and 19. Damaging property, selling drugs, hurting someone badly enough to need medical care, using or

threatening to use a weapon, and participating in a group fight all significantly declined from age 19 to age 21.

These findings suggest that patterns of offending among youth aging out of care are similar to those seen in the general population, with offending peaking during late adolescence and appearing to decline into adulthood (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Farrington, 1986). In order to identify variations in offending patterns over time among our sample of foster youth, we conducted a latent class analyses, or LCA, for the Midwest Study respondents participating in all three interviews and who reported on criminal behavior (n=438). In this LCA, we included six indicators of self-reported offending that represent any violent offending and any non-violent offending at each wave. The analysis revealed a five classes of youth. This included "Rare or Non-Offenders", representing approximately 34 percent of the sample, which included youth who reported consistently low offending experiences across the three waves. A second class, "Adolescent Offenders", with about 28 percent of the sample, is distinguished by relatively high levels of delinquent or criminal behaviors at age 17-18, but lower levels over time. By age 19 and 21, the probability of a violent offense dropped to almost zero. Non-violent offenses also become much less likely than seen during adolescence. Thus, this class of "Adolescent Offenders" appears similar to what Moffit (1993) referred to as "adolescent limited", meaning that offending is limited to what may be thought of as normative adolescent behavior that decreases as youth enter adulthood. A third class of "Desisting Offenders", with about 19 percent of the sample, is noteworthy for reporting delinquent and criminal behaviors at ages 17-18 and age 19, but reporting a decrease in these behaviors by age 21. Whereas the "Adolescent Offenders" limited their offending to

adolescence, this group of "Desisting Offenders" continued offending into late adolescence/early adulthood at age 19, but appears to change, or desist from, their behavior as they enter their 20's. "Chronic Offenders", including only 11 percent of the sample, is distinguished from other classes by having the highest reported probability of violent and non-violent behaviors over time. This group, although small, was most likely to report engaging in both types of behavior at all three waves of the study. Finally, a "Chronic Non-Violent" class, including only about 8 percent of the sample, had a high probability of engaging in non-violent offenses at each of the three waves. However, unlike the "Chronic Offenders" and more similar to "Rare or Non-Offenders", respondents in this class had a relatively low probability of engaging in violent offenses at any time point. Therefore, it appears that this class consists of chronic non-violent offenders.

Predicting Criminal Behavior and Arrest

To address the second and third research questions, which focus on whether out-of-home care experiences and social bonds predict self reported criminal behavior and the risk for arrest, we used two multivariate approaches. First, we estimated a series of Poisson and negative binomial regression models to examine if out-of-home care experiences and social bonds measures predict self-reported criminal behavior (measured through separate violent and non-violent scales) at age 21 (Wave 3). Our sample included 504 youth who responded to questions about criminal behavior during the Wave 3 interview. Second, we estimated Cox proportional hazard models, or "survival models" to examine whether out-of-home care experiences and social bonds predict the risk for arrest during the early transition to adulthood. These models allow us to examine the timing of

arrest, rather than simply the occurrence of an arrest, for the entire sample (n=728), including those who did not participate in later interviews.

In the regression analyses, independent variables were measured from the Wave 1 survey. These included demographic (race and gender) and background risk factors (prior delinquency or arrest, substance abuse and mental health diagnoses, teen parenthood), maltreatment history (physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect), out-of-home care placement experiences (age at entry, number of placements, type of placement at Wave 1, number of independent living services), state (Iowa, Wisconsin vs. Illinois), social bond factors (closeness to mother, father, and caregiver, attachment to the child welfare system, school enrollment, college plans, employment), and global social support.

We found that out-of-home care experiences predicted both violent and non-violent self reported crime. High numbers of foster care placements contributed to increases in both violent and non-violent crime. This instability was particularly salient for African American youth involved in non-violent crime. Being in group care versus traditional foster care at Wave 1 predicted more violent crime. Like number of placements and non-violent crime, the relationship between group care and violent crime was particularly strong for African American youth. Youth who access independent living services had lower violent behavior with reported violent crime decreasing by 2 percent for every independent living service received.

Contrary to out hypothesis, we found only limited evidence that social bonds predict violent or non-violent behavior. Having college plans at Wave 1 predicted less violent behavior by about one-third compared to those without college aspiration. Yet no social bond factors predicted non-violent crime. Although closeness to parental figures

did not significantly predict either violent or non-violent crime, not having a mother or father was related to greater criminal behavior.

As noted, while our sample of foster youth had similar self reported criminal behavior to those in a general sample, they had higher self reported arrests. To further examine whether out-of-home care experiences and social bonds predict crime among foster youth, we also modeled official arrest data through a Cox proportional hazard model. Forty-six percent of the sample was arrested between the Wave 1 interview (from 2002-2003) and the end of the study period (August 31, 2007), which is about 5.3 years. The risk for arrest was significantly associated with out-of-home care placement experiences. Being in group home care versus traditional foster care at the time of the Wave 1 interview led to significantly higher hazard rates, with a group care placement resulting in a 58 percent increase in the hazard rate when compared to a traditional foster care placement. Young people who experienced multiple placements also had a higher risk for arrest. Results show that each additional placement after the first resulted in a 4 percent increase in the hazard rate. This finding is particularly salient given that over 50 percent of the respondents experienced four or more placements during foster care.

We found some support for the hypothesis that having bonds as one approaches the transition to adulthood reduces the risk of arrest. As with the self reported crime outcomes, not having a mother was related to an increase in the hazard rate. In addition, closeness to mother predicted an increase in the risk for arrest among females. Bonds to education and employment did predict timing to arrest in general, but results were mixed. Having plans to graduate from college and being employed at Wave 1 reduced the hazard rate by 24 and 32 percent respectively. Thus, those with plans to attend college and those

employed before the onset of the transition to adulthood survived longer without experiencing an arrest during the transition than those unemployed or without college plans. Being enrolled in some form of school just prior to the transition, however, was not significantly related to the timing of arrest. These findings suggest that commitment to one's education may be more important than simply the status of being in school for the timing to first arrest. Finally, although race was not a significant predictor of self reported violent or non-violent crime, we note that African American youth had a significantly and substantively greater risk for official arrest than white youth.

Implications and Conclusions

Our findings have several implications for policy, practice, and research. First, our comparison of the Midwest Study and Add Health data on self-reported crime and arrest suggest that foster youth, like their peers, engage in less crime over time as they move into adulthood. While foster youth report more criminal behavior than their peers as they approach the age of majority, by age 19 and 21 we found few differences between the groups in self-reported crime. Findings from our latent class analysis indicate that only about one-fifth of the foster youth (19 percent; latent classes 4 and 5 combined) are chronic offenders, with somewhat less than half of these being nonviolent chronic offenders (8 percent of the sample). In other words, at least according to their own reports, as a group foster youth in transition pose little threat to community safety. On the other hand, in spite of these relatively small differences in self-reported criminal behavior, foster youth remain much more likely than their peers to be arrested as they make the transition to adulthood. These conflicting findings call for research designed to better understand the circumstances that lead to foster youth in transition to being arrested. Do

their self reports mask behavior that understandably leads to arrest, or might they be under more scrutiny than their peers or receive less sympathy from law enforcement authorities?

Second, findings from multivariate analyses suggest that greater attention is needed to ensure that older foster youth are provided with opportunities, both before and after reaching the age of majority, to become better connected to larger structures that traditionally support the transition to adulthood, including employment and education. While the associations identified in our study should not be regarded as causal, we found that prior employment and plans to attend college were associated with reductions in later crime.

Third, our findings on the relationships between the placement experiences of foster youth and later crime have implications for child welfare practice. Placement in group care near the point of transition from care was a strong predictor of criminal behavior and arrest, suggesting that efforts to prevent crime among foster youth making the transition to adulthood are well targeted at those in group care. Placement instability (e.g. higher numbers of placements) was also associated with later crime. While this finding may not be surprising, it calls for renewed efforts to minimize the instability that all too often characterizes the lives of children and youth in care.

Fourth, our findings suggest that more attention ought to be given to understanding the ways in which child welfare agencies assist older foster children to navigate relationships with their biological parents and extended families. Contrary to findings for vulnerable populations which have suggested that having a close and caring relationship with at least one adult is an important protective factor for youth at risk, this study suggests that greater understanding of the multiple bonds former foster youth have with

individuals and their communities is needed. While we found limited support for the hypothesis that closeness of foster youth to their parents was related to crime, we found stronger evidence that the absence of a parent increased the risk of self-reported crime and arrest. Research consistently suggests that a large percentage of these young people return to their families at discharge from the child welfare system (Wulcyzn and Hislop, 2001). It may then follow that these young people will be better served by an approach that attempts to minimize the risks presented by their caregivers, even when youth are not reunified with their caregivers. A related issue has to do with the relatives caring for these young people. Although the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act will facilitate more permanent placements with relatives, there is some evidence to suggest that helping relative caregivers to navigate relationships with biological parents may go a long way in stabilizing placements (Beeman and Boisen, 1999) and potentially decrease familial obstacles facing foster youth during the transition to adulthood.

Lastly, our finding that race is a significant predictor of arrest, but not self-reported crime, is disturbing and calls for further investigation and explanation. That race did not predict self reported non-violent *nor* violent crime in our sample suggests that the racial difference in official arrest versus self-reported outcomes is not simply an artifact of a self reported crime measure that reflects trivial and non-serious offenses (see Elliot and Ageton, 1980). In other words, our findings are inconsistent with past work that finds significant race differences when examining more serious self reported crime measures (Elliot and Ageton, 1980). If our self-reported crime measures are not differentially valid by race (e.g. .if African Americans are not less likely to report engaging in certain

offenses[5]), then our finding that African American youth experience greater arrests but do not reporting engaging in more crime suggests a possible bias in police response. Foster youth already face considerable challenges making the transition to adulthood and African American foster youth appear to face the added burden of heightened risk of arrest that may not reflect a heightened engagement in crime.

[5] See Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis (1981) for a discussion on this methodological issue.

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