



Research article

Maltreatment histories of aging out foster youth: A comparison of official investigated reports and self-reports of maltreatment prior to and during out-of-home care

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ABSTRACT

This study compared official investigated reports of child maltreatment with retrospective self-reports prior to and during out-of-home care for a sample of foster youth who reached the age of majority in out-of-home care in Illinois. Using matched administrative and self-reported data for 474 youth who completed a baseline interview in the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (i.e. the Midwest study) at ages 17–18, and 386 youth who completed a follow up interview at age 19, this study finds that official reports and self-reports of maltreatment prior to and during out-of-home care differ significantly. Findings from this study add insight into measurement discrepancies, and help to inform understanding of the extent of maltreatment experienced by this sub-sample of young people exiting out-of-home care in adulthood. Study findings have implications for independent living policy and practice in child welfare.

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Introduction

Prior to exiting out-of-home care through emancipation, many youth have spent multiple years in challenging circumstances (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Havlicek, 2014; Pecora et al., 2005). A review of research on aging out foster youth in the past two decades suggests that prior to entry in out-of-home care the rate of child neglect ranges from 28% (Pecora et al., 2005) to 75% (English et al., 2003), the rate of physical abuse ranges from 19% (Pecora et al., 2005) to 64% (English et al., 2003), and the rate of sexual abuse ranges from 31% (Courtney et al., 2001) to 54% (Pecora et al., 2005). By comparison, of children under age 18 in the U.S. who are reported to child welfare authorities, 80% are investigated for neglect, 18% for physical abuse, and 9% for sexual abuse, according to the latest estimates from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). While foster care should protect foster youth from further victimization, as many as 33% report maltreatment by a substitute caregiver during out-of-home care (Pecora et al., 2005). Without intervention, research finds that high impact and recurring forms of maltreatment heighten the risk for negative outcomes during and following out-of-home care, including inpatient hospitalization and placement in residential treatment (McMillen et al., 2004), poly-substance use (Vaughn, Ollie, McMillen, Scott, & Munson, 2007), psychiatric disorder (McMillen et al., 2005), homelessness (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013), pregnancy (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010) and violent crime (Lee, Courtney, & Hook, 2012). This suggests that early screening of maltreatment histories and trauma-focused responses represent a critical public health priority.

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In 2011, the *Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act* (P.L. 112–34) was passed to require states to include in their health oversight plans a description of how they screen for and treat emotional trauma associated with maltreatment and removal from families. A follow up *Informational Memorandum* issued in 2012 by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) encourages states to identify a complete history of maltreatment and to assess for trauma at multiple points during child welfare system involvement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). The extent that states compile comprehensive histories of maltreatment and/or use maltreatment histories to make informed decisions about short- and long-term service plans remains to a large extent unknown. This may be particularly true for adolescents who have been historically viewed by policymakers, researchers, and practitioners as being less vulnerable to risks (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Simmel, 2012) and less worthy of intervention than younger aged children (Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009).

There are several additional factors that obscure greater understanding of the extent of maltreatment experienced by aging out foster youth. First, much of the research on aging out foster youth has focused attention on the transition years and beyond. Less attention has been given to the events leading up to child welfare system involvement and/or emancipation from out-of-home care. Second, relatively little research has investigated age-related changes in the investigation of maltreatment allegations even though research finds older adolescents are less likely to have an allegation of maltreatment that is investigated by child protection systems and/or to receive supportive services following an investigation (Jonson-Reid, 2002) and self-reports of maltreatment by adolescents are less likely to be substantiated by child protection investigations than are reports made by mandated professionals (Kesner, 2007). Third, while combining sources of information on maltreatment may provide a more nuanced understanding of the extent of maltreatment in a case history (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Pinto & Maia, 2013; Shaffer, Huston, & Egeland, 2008; Swahn et al., 2006), few studies of aging out foster youth have used multiple sources of information to describe maltreatment histories.

The goals of the current study are to combine, describe, and compare multiple reports of maltreatment prior to and during out-of-home care for a sample of foster youth who reached the age of majority in out-of-home care. First, we describe the prevalence of maltreatment in officially investigated and retrospective self-reports of youth making the transition to adulthood in Illinois. This provides descriptive information about the types and dimensions of maltreatment, which may vary depending on the source of maltreatment information. Second, we examine the agreement between officially investigated and self-reported maltreatment for three broad types of maltreatment to understand the extent that similarities and discrepancies exist. Third, we describe rates of maltreatment using two sources of information in order to provide a more complete history than currently exists.

Background

As of September 30, 2014, there were 22,392 youth who exited out-of-home care through emancipation or aging out during the last fiscal year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). This represents approximately 9% of all children who exit out-of-home care annually. [The most common reason for discharge during FY 2014 is reunification (51%) followed by adoption (21%), guardianship (95), and living with other relative (7%).] Three decades of research finds that emancipating foster youth face significant difficulties in making the transition to adulthood, including low levels of education and employment, and high rates of health risks, homelessness and criminal justice system involvement (Ahrens, Garrison, & Courtney, 2014; Barth, 1990; Courtney & Barth, 1996; Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012; Dworsky, 2005; Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009; Hook & Courtney, 2011). Foster youth must additionally learn to successfully cope with histories of abuse and neglect prior to and during out-of-home care.

Research on aging out foster youth finds that prior to out-of-home care rates of neglect are lower than other children investigated for maltreatment in the U.S. and rates of physical abuse and sexual abuse are higher (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; English et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005; U.S. DHHS, 2015). There is also some evidence that multiple types of maltreatment may be common (McMillen et al., 2004). In a recent study, less than 10 percent of a sample of foster youth in Illinois had a single type of maltreatment investigated in their case record (Havlicek, 2014). A high prevalence of multiple types of maltreatment may have to do with cumulative exposure to adversity. The majority of the young people in this study had investigated maltreatment allegations during two or more developmental periods.

Although child welfare systems are intended to protect children from maltreatment by substitute caregivers, maltreatment in out-of-home care occurs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Studies of aging out foster youth reporting on abuse and neglect by a substitute caregiver (i.e. foster parent, group home staff, etc.) during out-of-home care suggest that rates of neglect range from 20% (Pecora et al., 2005) to 33% (Courtney et al., 2001), rates of physical abuse range from 13% (Courtney et al., 2001) to 15% (Pecora et al., 2005), and rates of sexual victimization range from 2% (Courtney et al., 2001) to 8% (Pecora et al., 2005). Though these rates are not as high as those experienced prior to out-of-home care, they are substantially higher than the national incidence rates that are reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to assess state performance in operating child welfare programs (U.S. DHHS, 2013).

The above review highlights the prevalence of high impact forms of abuse and chronic exposure to neglect prior to out-of-home care and identifies a high rate of re-victimization during out-of-home care. The range of methods and measures used to collect this maltreatment information may nevertheless mean that existing studies misestimate the prevalence of abuse and neglect in aging out foster youth populations. One reason has to do with the reliance on a range of measures and methods to identify child maltreatment such as caseworker interviews of their clients' maltreatment history (English et al., 2003), retrospective self-reports in adolescence and adulthood (Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Keller, & Havlicek, 2005;

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