Children and Youth Services Review 36 (2014) 42–52

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Educational outcomes for adults formerly in foster care: The role of ethnicity

Susy Villegas [a,*], James Rosenthal [a], Kirk O'Brien [b], Peter J. Pecora [b,c]

[a] University of Oklahoma, Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, United States
[b] Casey Family Programs, United States
[c] University of Washington, School of Social Work, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 February 2013
Received in revised form 4 November 2013
Accepted 6 November 2013
Available online 16 November 2013

Keywords:
Foster care
Out-of-home care
Education disparities
Hispanics
Adult educational outcomes
Child welfare
Disproportionality

ABSTRACT

Focusing on Hispanics and using data from the Casey National Foster Care Alumni Study, this paper examines the impact of ethnicity and other predictors on educational outcomes of adults placed in family foster care as children/youth. Though 88% of the alumni completed high school with a diploma or a GED, less than 10% obtained bachelor's degrees or higher. Regression models indicated that ethnicity did not predict outcomes. Physical/learning disabilities, placement in care due to child maltreatment, younger age at entrance into child welfare, less time in care, instability in care, less preparation for leaving care, and younger age at the time of the study interview predicted lower educational outcomes. Findings are interpreted and the importance of stability of placement, continuity of services, and transition-to-independence services are discussed.

1. Introduction

Education is relevant for the development and prosperity of a nation, but also for the economic and social stability of its individuals and families through generations. Access to higher education contributes to social equity (Finnie, 2012), while lower socioeconomic status predicts lower educational outcomes (Johansson & Höjer, 2012). For ethnic minorities overrepresented in the lower socioeconomic sectors of society, the risk for low education attainment is higher. In a cyclical way, lower education attainment restricts ethnic minorities' opportunities for social mobility, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Child welfare research continues to pinpoint challenges in the education of those placed in foster care, from preschool to high school and, later, in university education (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009; Hernandez & Macartney, 2008; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004; Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011). Even though educational challenges for foster care youth have long-term consequences for adult self-sufficiency and independence (Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Macmillan & Hagan, 2004), research pertaining to adult *educational* outcomes for such youth is limited, especially for ethnic minority groups.

These limitations are particularly important given the overrepresentation of ethnic minority children in foster care (Fluke, Jones-Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2011; Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003; Hill, 2006; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Schuck, 2005; USDHHS, 2008) and the education disparities that affect ethnic minorities (Fry, 2010; Hernandez & Macartney, 2008; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009; Rueben & Murray, 2008).

Ethnic minority children represent 44% of the (estimated) 73,878,478 U.S. children/youth under age 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, in 2010, ethnic minority children represented about 55% of the children/youth in foster care (USDHHS, 2011). Even after controlling for child, caregiver, household, and maltreatment characteristics, the odds of being placed in foster care are 44% greater for African American children than for White children (Knott & Donovan, 2010).

Of particular interest for this paper is the meager information concerning Hispanics, which renders them next-to invisible to child welfare authorities and policymakers. There are, however, 47 million Hispanics in the United States, 15% of the population (Fry, 2010). Hispanics constitute 25% of the national population estimate for those younger than 5 and 23% of all persons under age 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). In terms of foster care, the USDHHS (2012) preliminary report for year 2011 showed 83,810 Hispanic children/youth in out-of-home care; this represented 21% of the foster care population. The increasing representation of Hispanic youth in foster care is evident across many states, including Washington and Minnesota (Hill, 2007), Puerto Rico, New Mexico, California, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, and Connecticut (Hill, 2003). Preliminary reports indicate that the greatest representation

* Corresponding author at: Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, University of Oklahoma, 700 Elm Avenue, Norman, OK 73019, United States. Tel.: +1 405 325 1400; fax: +1 405 325 7072.
E-mail address: susy.villegas@ou.edu (S. Villegas).

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.11.005

of Hispanics seems to occur in urban areas (Enchautegui, 1997; Hill, 2006).

At the national level, only 2 out of 5 Hispanics aged 17 or older participated in adult education programs in the nation (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003). In 2004, Fry (2004) reported that the largest educational gap between Hispanic and White students was in the number of bachelor's degrees earned; 57% of Hispanics versus 81% of Whites who began a four-year college program completed the degree. Even when sharing the same level of preparation at entrance into postsecondary education, Hispanics fared worse than Whites. The gap existed across all areas of higher education, including community colleges, where White students achieved graduation rates that were twice those of Hispanic students (Fry, 2004).

The percentage of youth with some college attendance or higher is also greater for Whites (61%) than for Hispanics (36%) (Fry, 2010). Disparities have been documented in secondary school completion, with 67% of Hispanics compared to 82% of White students completing high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Fry (2010) noted that among adults 20 and older, 37% of Hispanics did not complete high school in comparison to 10% of Whites. Wealth differences have been linked not only to Hispanic but also to African American disparities in grade retention, participation in gifted programs, and extracurricular activities (Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009). Hernandez and Macartney (2008) found only a minimum change in mathematics and reading test score disparities for Hispanic and African American children relative to White children from 1985 to 2004.

Recognizing that the large group of ethnic minority children in care reflects differentiated service needs and risk factors (Drake et al., 2011), researchers have also documented disparities in services (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011; Ayon, 2009; Dunbar & Barth, 2007; Fluke et al., 2011). For example, ethnic minority teens in care are less likely to receive therapeutic services and medications than are White teens (McMillen et al., 2004).

These findings raise questions regarding long-term educational outcomes for those placed in foster care. In particular, do educational outcomes for Hispanic adults formerly in foster care differ from other foster care alumni? Using data from the Casey National Foster Care Alumni Study (CNFCAS), this paper examines the role of ethnicity among other predictors of educational outcomes for Hispanic, African American, and White adults who spent time in family foster care as children.

2. Literature review

Research on adult educational outcomes for those placed in family foster care as children is limited for ethnic minority adults in general and is even more scarce for Hispanics. This literature review focuses on high school and college educational outcomes, challenges and predictors of those outcomes, and differences in outcomes across ethnic groups.

2.1. High school education completion

High school completion is a substantial challenge for young adults transitioning out of foster care. A body of research examines whether youth in care complete high school with a regular high school diploma or a GED certificate, or do not complete it. Barth (1990), Blome (1997), and Reilly (2003) observed that more than half of youth exit from foster care with no high school degree, and many remain without a degree for months and even years after exiting care. For example, Blome's (1997) longitudinal study of high school sophomores reported that, after two years, 37% of youth in foster care had dropped out of school relative to 16% in a matched comparison group of youth who lived with at least one parent. Five years after dropping out of school, 23% of the foster care alumni had no high school diploma or GED certificate compared to 7% of the youth in the comparison group.

Concerning placement type and educational outcomes, Benedict, Zuravin, and Stallings (1996) noted that kinship versus nonkinship placement was not associated with high school completion. Carpenter and Clyman (2004) observed that kinship care predicted a lower high school completion rate (79.2% vs. 88.8%) for young women in kinship care compared to young women who lived with at least one biological or adoptive parent throughout their childhood. Recently, Schneider et al. (2009) reported on a sample from the California Women's Health Survey (CWHS) (Induni & Hoegh, 2006). Relative to other women, those with out-of-home placement during childhood were more likely to not graduate from high school (13.3% vs. 7.2%) and to not complete education beyond high school (82% vs. 66.7%).

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth Study (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2005; Hook & Courtney, 2011) documented that at age 19, 37% of youth in foster care had not completed high school; this compares to 9% in the representative National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) (Courtney et al., 2005; Harris & Udry, 1994–2008). At age 25 or 26, 20% of those with foster care experiences reported not having obtained a high school diploma or GED compared to 6% in the Add Health sample. Among foster care alumni respondents in the Midwest evaluation, males fared worse than females in all educational outcomes (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011).

In the Northwest Casey Foster Care alumni study of young adults served by private and public agencies in Washington and Oregon (Pecora et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2006), the high school graduation rate for foster care alumni was 84.8%, nearly matching the general population high school graduation rate of 87.3% for those aged 18 to 29 reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) and the U.S. Census Bureau (2000). However, of the foster care alumni who graduated from high school, 28.5% did so with a GED as compared to 5% in the general population.

The Casey National Foster Care Alumni Study (CNFCAS) results (Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2006) document a high school completion rate of 72.5% at the time of the youth case closure. But when those alumni were interviewed at age 25 and older, the high school completion rate increased to 87.8%, a rate nearly identical to the just-cited general population rate of 87.3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). However, completion of high school through a GED accounted for 18.2% of cases in the CNFCAS. A more recent Casey Family Programs (CFP) study, examining 19-, 22-, and 25-year-old Casey alumni, found that 87.5% had completed a high school education, 73.5% with a diploma and 14% with a GED. In addition, 10.2% were attending high school or GED courses at the time of the study (Havalchak, White, & O'Brien, 2008).

Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt (2005) studied former foster care youth who were attending college. At exit from foster care or at emancipation, 84.3% of the respondents had completed high school (0.5% with a GED) and 21.9% were already attending college. The mean age for high school or GED completion was 17.9 years of age, but ranged from 15 to 32, pointing to widely varying education trajectories for these young adults.

Overall, young adults with foster care experience encountered considerable difficulties achieving a high school education, with several studies reporting lower graduation rates than for other young adults. The high school graduation rate for youth from the Northwest Study and the CFP study are the exceptions. Young adults in the CNFCAS achieved a graduation rate nearly identical to that in the general population. However, CFP's alumni achieved this education milestone more frequently via a GED than did youth or adults in the general population, and many required a longer time to do so.

2.2. College education

For many adults who were in foster care in childhood, college attendance and graduation are elusive. In a national Swedish population