



From placement to prison revisited: Do mental health services disrupt the delinquency pipeline among Latino, African American and Caucasian youth in the child welfare system?



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ABSTRACT

Racial and ethnic disparities in delinquency among child welfare-involved youth are well documented. However, less is known about the mechanisms through which these disparities occur. This study explores the extent to which sets of variables predict the occurrence of juvenile delinquency and whether race/ethnicity moderates the strength of the relationships between (1) social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) problems and delinquency and (2) mental health service use and delinquency. We used a nationally representative sample of 727 African American, Caucasian, and Latino youth between the ages of 12–17 who were referred to the child welfare system. Controlling for age, gender, placement instability, maltreatment history, poverty, and urbanicity, linear regression analyses revealed that African American and Latino youth engaged in more delinquent acts than Caucasian youth did. However, service use decreased the likelihood of engaging in more delinquent acts for African Americans. Additional efforts are needed to illuminate and address the contextual and organizational barriers to delivering effective mental health services as a strategy to reduce racial disparities in delinquent behavior.

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Introduction

Point-in-time data indicate that there are roughly 400,000 children and youth placed in foster care in the United States, a third of whom are adolescents ages 12–17 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Due to their histories of maltreatment, relational disruptions associated with out-of-home placement, and often the ensuing trauma, these young people are at increased risk for experiencing social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) problems (Maschi, Bradley, & Morgen, 2008; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). For example, nearly half of all adolescents investigated as victims of child

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abuse and neglect report at least one mental health problem (Heneghan et al., 2013), and almost half of young adolescents in foster care experience at least one health-risk behavior, such as early sexual activity, depression/suicidality, substance abuse, or delinquency (Leslie et al., 2010). In fact, youth with at least one substantiated report of child abuse or neglect average 47% higher delinquency rates than their non-maltreated peers (Ryan & Testa, 2005). The consequences of delinquent behavior and subsequent justice system involvement can be far-reaching and often deleterious to youth, including difficulties in securing employment, achieving educational goals, and maintaining community-based relationships and social support networks (Hjalmarsson, 2008; Lopes et al., 2012).

There is a substantial body of literature, spanning over three decades, that supports a positive association between the occurrence of child maltreatment and subsequent juvenile delinquency (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Runyan & Gould, 1985; Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, & Marshall, 2007). However, the strength of the relationship between child welfare and juvenile delinquent outcomes is disparate among subgroups of maltreated youth, and studies have begun to explore moderating factors that may explain the differing associations between child maltreatment and juvenile justice (Goodkind, Shook, Kim, Pohl, & Herring, 2013). For example, demographic factors, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and age have been identified as risk factors for delinquency, as studies suggest that older youth, minorities, and males are at increased risk for juvenile justice involvement (Chiu, Ryan, & Herz, 2011). In terms of child welfare characteristics, both placement instability (i.e., multiple foster care placements) and type of maltreatment have been associated with juvenile delinquency (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000). In addition to individual-level characteristics, environmental factors, such as poverty and urbanicity, have also been related to an increased risk of juvenile delinquency (Rodriguez, 2013).

Although there is a growing body of literature investigating factors that influence delinquency outcomes among foster youth, most of the studies have explored risk factors rather than protective factors. For example, though social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) problems may increase the risk of juvenile delinquency (Maschi et al., 2008), mental health service use may function protectively (Foster, Qaseem, & Connor, 2004). However, few studies have examined the protective role of mental health service receipt in ameliorating juvenile justice involvement among foster youth. Moreover, there is a dearth of literature investigating the moderating role of race/ethnicity in mental health service use as a protective mechanism to decrease the likelihood of juvenile delinquency. Only one study known to the authors has explored the relationship between delinquency outcomes and mental health service use by racial groups among youth in foster care (i.e., Goodkind et al., 2013), though the study was limited in its measurement by only including mental health service use prior to juvenile justice involvement. The study also utilized a geographically restricted sample, limiting the generalizability of the findings, and only included a sample of African American and Caucasian youth.

Drawing from a national sample of adolescent African American, Caucasian, and Latino foster youth, the present study aims to replicate and extend prior research by exploring the extent to which sets of variables predict the occurrence of juvenile delinquency as well as investigate the extent to which the strength of the relationships between (1) SEB problems and delinquency and (2) mental health use and delinquency differs based on race/ethnicity. Our investigation is guided by three research questions: (1) To what extent do demographic factors, child welfare characteristics, SEB problems, mental health service use, and environmental context influence delinquent outcomes? (2) To what extent does race/ethnicity moderate the relationship between SEB problems and delinquent outcomes, controlling for demographic factors, child welfare characteristics, and environmental context? (3) To what extent does race/ethnicity moderate the relationship between mental health service use and delinquent outcomes, controlling for demographic factors, child welfare characteristics, and environmental context?

Literature review

Juvenile delinquency among foster youth: risk and protective factors

Demographic factors

Gender, race, and age have been identified as risk factors for delinquency among adolescent foster youth, though findings are somewhat mixed. For example, in their 2000 study on the path to adolescent incarceration from child welfare, Jonson-Reid and Barth reveal that, overall, African American youth age 15 and older have the highest rate of entry into juvenile justice following foster care. Another study investigated whether the relationship between substantiated child welfare reports and delinquency varied by race and gender, and findings indicate that older youth, males, and African Americans are at greater risk of juvenile arrest (Chiu et al., 2011). Using data from the Midwest Study, Cusick, Havlicek, and Courtney (2012) corroborate these results, finding that both males and African Americans are at increased risk for arrest. However, another study conducted with 2754 lower to lower-middle SES youth finds that risk of entry into the juvenile justice system increases by age, but only until age 14, after which it declines (Vazsonyi & Chen, 2010). Additionally, no differences in risk of entry exist among African American, American Indian, Asian American, and European American youth, though Hispanic youth are 73% more likely to enter juvenile justice systems. Likewise, a study using a nationally representative sample of early adolescent youth (ages 11–14) with child welfare involvement shows that though older youth and males are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, race/ethnicity is not a risk factor for delinquency outcomes (Grogan-Kaylor, Ruffolo, Ortega, & Clarke, 2008). The mixed findings from these studies indicate that additional research is needed to better understand moderating factors that may elucidate the relationship

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