The Child Welfare System, Social Support, and Independence Readiness

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Modern youth are taking longer to transition to independence than previous generations (Schulenberg et al. 2004), and this transitional phase is key to establishing successful trajectories (Keller, Cusick, and Courtney 2007). However, youth in the Child Welfare System (CWS), who have been alleged victims of abuse or neglect, are likely both to be less prepared for independence and to receive familial support in this transition for a shorter period of time (Jaffee et al. 2018; Miller, Paschall, and Azar 2017; Propp, Ortega, and NewHeart 2003). Following the transition to adulthood, CWS adolescents are disproportionately likely to experience homelessness, incarceration, and welfare dependency (Fowler et al. 2017; Iglehart 1995; Ryan, Perron, and Huang 2016). Youth who experience abuse or neglect are also more likely to be unemployed, to be uninsured, and to be living below the federal poverty line (Zielinski 2009).

Children involved with the CWS have typically been maltreated by someone close to them, and those at greatest risk of ongoing harm are removed from their parents' care and placed with either non-relative foster parents, kinship caregivers, or in a group home or institution (Kortenkamp 2002). Each of these placements is associated with disadvantages in terms of independence readiness, as children who remain with maltreating parents tend to have poor outcomes in both the short and long term (Stevens et al. 2018), and youth who are separated from their parents may be traumatized and struggle to thrive in their new environments (Iglehart 1995; Schwartz 2010). Furthermore, children who are removed from their biological homes and placed in kinship care may be placed in homes with additional challenges, such as poverty and mental illness (Kortenkamp 2002).

Some research suggests that independence readiness for CWS youth varies by placement setting. Youth in foster care are more likely to work as teenagers, and to perform well in school (Inglehart 1995). Non-relative foster parents also tend to have advantages over other caregivers- they are wealthier, better educated, and more likely to be married (Barth et al. 2008; Schwartz 2010). Kinship caregivers are more likely to live in urban areas, in poverty, and with a single caregiver (Barth et al. 2008; Sakai, Lin, and Flores 2011; Schwartz 2010), but these placements are also more stable (Keller, Cusick, and Courtney 2007). Finally, adolescents who remain with their biological parents avoid the instability and trauma associated with placement in the foster care system, but are socioeconomically disadvantaged, may be exposed to additional maltreatment, and are not offered the same systemic supports as youth in foster care.

The current study will seek to determine whether patterns of independence readiness differ by placement status: biological home, kinship care, and non-relative foster care. Additionally, we will test whether social support mediates the relationship between placement and independence readiness. Social capital theory posits that individuals gain advantage through connections to other people (Portes 1998). One key aspect of social capital is social support, a measure of social connections and their ability to provide help when needed. Social support may be a critical resource for vulnerable youth in preparing for independence (Paulsen and Berg

2016), as it predicts high school graduation, higher grades, employment, and reduced delinquency (Carbonaro 1998; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998). In sum, social support helps youth to develop the necessary skills to support themselves and meet their goals (Coleman 1988; Cusick, Havlicek, and Courtney 2012).

Youth in various placements may experience different levels of social support, which could explain gradients in independence readiness. Foster youth report fairly high support by caregivers, even after exiting the system (Cusick, Havlicek, and Courtney 2012; Schwartz 2010). However, youth in kinship care tend to have stronger relationships with caregivers and may have wider social networks given reduced residential instability (Schwartz 2010). They also have more relationships with adults (Schwartz 2010). In contrast, youth in biological parent care report relatively low social support from caregivers (Schwartz 2010), though these relationships are more consistent.

Notably, youth in foster or kinship care later in adolescence are those who are most likely to 'age out' of foster care, rather than be reunified with their birth parents, adopted, or placed in guardianship. As such, there may be greater emphasis placed on preparing them for independence if they are expected to have less social support in early adulthood than youth in permanent family arrangements. In addition, older youth who are removed from their families of origin are also more likely than younger children to experience placement instability (Oosterman et al., 2006; Sattler et al., 2018) and restrictive or group-based placement settings (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2015), both of which may reduce their access to social support.

The present study will build upon current knowledge of independence readiness in youth involved with the CWS, by testing differences by placement in social support and in independence readiness. Finally, we will test whether the relationship between placement status and independence readiness is mediated by social support.

Methods

Data

The current study will use data from the second cohort of the National Surveys of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) II, which surveyed children involved with the Child Welfare System. Respondents were investigated due to reports of maltreatment, but children were included in the sample regardless of whether the initial report was substantiated. Participation did not depend on continued involvement with the system or on the receipt of services. In addition to CWS-involved children, biological parents, caretakers, and caseworkers contributed survey data to the study. Weights included in the dataset adjust the sample to be nationally representative of children involved with the CWS. NSCAW II included 5,873 children, aged 0-17.5, who encountered the CWS between February 2008 and May 2009. The current study will use three waves of interviews: wave 1, 3-6 months after the initial CWS investigation; wave 2, 18 months later; and wave 3, 36 months later.

Sample

Although CWS youth live in a variety of different placements, we limited the sample to individuals living in biological homes, kinship care, and non-relative foster care or group homes, as other placements lacked sufficient sample size for analysis. Next, we kept only individuals

who were aged 16 or 17 at either Wave 2 or Wave 3 of the data, in order to measure independence readiness for youth as they neared adulthood. This resulted in a sample of 524 youth. Of this weighted sample, 81 percent of respondents were living in their biological parent homes prior to turning eighteen, 13 percent were placed in kinship care, and 5 percent were living with non-relative foster parents or in group homes. The sample is 62.8 percent female, and 37.2 percent male. The largest portion of the sample is "Non-Hispanic White" (45%), with 16 percent "Non-Hispanic Black", 28 percent "Hispanic", and 12 percent "Other".

Measures

To measure independence readiness, we included a variety of variables intended to capture different facets of readiness. To measure educational readiness, we used a variable indicating school attendance, measured with the question "Do you go regularly, that is, most school days?" To measure employment readiness, we included the questions "How many hours do you spend working for pay in a typical non-summer week?" and "How many hours do you spend working for pay in a typical summer week?" In order to directly measure independence readiness, we used the questions "How prepared do you feel to live on your own?" and "How Worried do you feel about living on your own?" with response options "Very," Somewhat," and "Not at all." Finally, we utilized the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment-Short Version, a series of questions asking about youth's knowledge in how to use a checking account, apply for college, get community help, drive, get family planning, get income assistance, interview for a job, get medical care, use public transportation, rent an apartment, and shop and cook.

Our key independent variable is placement setting at the wave prior to independence measures, when youth are sixteen or seventeen. This measure was compiled from reports by caregivers, caseworkers, and children, and indicates the type of home in which the child currently resided. We eliminated adoptees and combined the categories "Non-relative Foster Care" and "Group Home" to create a categorical variable coded 1 "Birth Parent Home," 2 "Kinship Care," and 3 "Non-relative Foster Care or Group Home."

We used several variables to measure social support, the key mediator. First, we used a number of measures to create a scale of respondents' relationships with their peers. These questions include "How often is it easy to make new friends at school?" and "How often do you have nobody to talk to at school?" with response options "Never," "Sometimes," "Often," and "Almost Always." Peer support has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.89. We also used a measure of neighborhood support, using caregiver reports of how much neighbors help each other, ranging from one, "less often than average" to three, "more often than average." Finally, from the questions, "Is there an adult or adults you can turn to for help if you have a serious problem?," "Do you feel you can go to a parent or someone who is like a parent with a serious problem?," "Could you go to another relative (not a parent) with a serious problem?," and "Has there ever been an adult outside of your family who has encouraged you and believed in you?," we created a count of adult support, ranging from 0 to 4.

Analytic Approach

In order to explore our research questions, we used Latent Class Analysis to group respondents by patterns of independence readiness. Latent Class Analysis incorporates predictor

variables by using logistic probabilities to measure their co-occurrence of solidarity and conflict. Next, we used multinomial logistic regression in order to predict respondents' readiness category using placement status and test social support as a potential mediator. We used multiple imputation methods in order to handle missing data in the sample.

Preliminary Results

Latent Class Analysis yielded three distinct classes of independence readiness. Results for this analysis are displayed in Table 1. Youth in Class 1, *Poorly Prepared*, which constituted 38 percent of the sample, were the least prepared, reporting the least practical knowledge in all areas. For example, 13 percent of *Poorly Prepared* youth knew how to use a checking account, and 6 percent knew how to rent an apartment. Additionally, they were most likely to report feeling unprepared and worried about independence, although the largest portions stated that they were somewhat prepared (59%) and somewhat worried (48%). Finally, the vast majority (93%) indicated that they did not work during the summer or the school year.

In contrast, youth in Class 2, *Working Track*, which included 24 percent of the sample, reported moderate practical knowledge. 53 percent of these youth stated that they knew how to use a checking account, and 22 percent stated that they knew how to rent an apartment. Of the three classes, *Working Track* youth reported more knowledge than *Poorly Prepared* youth and less than Class 3 in every area except for job interviews, where they were most knowledgeable. In a similar vein, *Working Track* youth reported by far the most work experience. During the summer, 81 percent stated that they worked some hours, and all reported work hours during the school year. *Working Track* youth felt better prepared for and less worried about independence than did *Poorly Prepared* youth, although the modal response was still "somewhat worried' and "somewhat prepared."

Finally, practical knowledge was highest among youth in Class 3, *Highly Knowledgeable*, which constituted the remaining 38 percent of the sample. 66 percent of these youth reported that they knew how to use a checking account, and 67 percent stated that they knew how to rent an apartment. 99 percent reported feeling "somewhat prepared" or "very prepared" for independence, and the largest percentage (48%) stated that they were not at all worried about independence. Although the majority of *Highly Knowledgeable* youth did not work, they were more likely to be employed than *Poorly Prepared* youth. School attendance was high among all classes (87-88%).

Descriptive statistics by readiness class are displayed in Table 2. Models predicting social support are presented in Table 3, and multinomial logistic regression results comparing *Poorly Prepared* and *Working Track* youth to *Highly Knowledgeable* youth are displayed in Table 4. In the next phase of the analysis, we found that placement status did significantly predict independence readiness class. Youth in kinship care had 75.9 percent lower risk of being *Poorly Prepared* as opposed to *Highly Knowledgeable* than did youth in biological parent care. However, we did not find placement status to be significantly predictive of any of our measures of social support. Finally, although neither the number of supportive adults nor neighborhood support predicted readiness class, we did identify a relationship between peer support and readiness. A standard deviation of peer support predicted 53 percent decreased risk of being *Poorly Prepared* as opposed to *Highly Knowledgeable.*

Discussion

Preliminary results from this study indicate that CWS youth fit one of three profiles as they approach independence. *Poorly Prepared* youth are ill prepared for independence, with little work history and practical knowledge. *Working Track* youth report moderate practical knowledge, but much more extensive work history and knowledge about employment. Finally, *Highly Knowledgeable* youth are the most informed about various facets of independent living. Placement status within the Child Welfare System predicts membership in these classes, as youth in kinship care are less likely to be *Poorly Prepared*, as compared to youth in biological parent care. Placement status does not predict social support, and support therefore does not mediate the relationship between placement and independence readiness. However, peer support promotes readiness.

These results reveal that peer relationships are key to optimal development for youth in the CWS. The importance of peer support highlights the need for placement stability, as supportive relationships are difficult to develop and maintain for youth who move frequently. Additionally, youth who remain in their biological parent homes would benefit from additional resources and training in preparing for the transition to adulthood.

We anticipate several limitations in the current study. First, characteristics of children and their families tend to predict placement setting. Therefore, it may remain difficult to sort out effects due to placement from those resulting from pre-existing characteristics. Second, placement instability is high among CWS-involved youth, which may limit my ability to determine placement outcomes. Finally, independence readiness is difficult to measure exactly, and therefore some indicators may overestimate or underestimate actual readiness. However, this study has the potential to contribute to understanding on independence readiness among Child Welfare System youth, as well as differences by placement status. CWS youth are likely to be forced into independence earlier than the general population, and with fewer institutional supports, and therefore understanding these processes is essential to assisting this vulnerable population.

Tables

Table 1. Means of Component Variable by Latent Class

	Poorly Prepared	Working Track	Highly Knowledgeable
School Attendance	0.87	0.88	0.88
Practical Knowledge:			
Use Checking Account	0.13	0.53	0.66
Apply for College	0.18	0.39	0.59
Get Community Help	0.32	0.55	0.81
Drive	0.19	0.29	0.33
Get Family Planning	0.44	0.69	0.90
Get Income Assist.	0.09	0.12	0.52
Interview for Job	0.54	0.91	0.89
Get Medical Care	0.28	0.34	0.89
Use Public Transport.	0.74	0.81	0.89
Rent Apartment	0.06	0.22	0.67
Shop/Cook	0.88	0.95	0.97
Prepared for Indep.			
Not at all Prepared	0.31	0.16	0.01
Somewhat Prepared	0.59	0.67	0.54
Very Prepared	0.10	0.17	0.45
Worried about Indep.			
Very Worried	0.23	0.09	0.08
Somewhat Worried	0.48	0.57	0.44
Not at all Worried	0.29	0.34	0.48
Summer Work Hours			
0	0.93	0.19	0.75
1-20	0.06	0.73	0.19
20+	0.01	0.08	0.06
Regular Work Hours			
0	0.93	0.00	0.67
1-20	0.04	0.69	0.21
20+	0.04	0.31	0.12

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics by Readiness Class

	Poorly Prepared	Working Track	Highly Knowledgeable
	Means/Proportions		
Placement Status			
Biological Parent Care	0.39	0.28	0.32
Kinship Care	0.22	0.35	0.43
Non-Relative Foster Care	0.36	0.14	0.50
Peer Support	0.36	0.46	0.59*
Neighborhood Support	2.04	1.92	2.09
Adult Support	3.56	3.66	3.71
Child Age (at time 2)	16.51	16.39	16.48
Female	0.74	0.53*	0.58*
Race			
White	0.26	0.25	0.49
Black	0.43	0.17	0.4
Hispanic	0.50	0.36	0.13***
Other Race	0.36	0.38	0.25
Physical Abuse	0.30	0.38	0.38
Sexual Abuse	0.08	0.13	0.18
Caregiver Education	0.37	0.35	0.29
Caregiver Marital Status	0.41	0.47	0.49
Cognitive Disability	0.35	0.28	0.41
Physical Disability	0.12	0.10	0.12
# of Children in Household	2.66	2.51	2.40
Household Income Cat.	6.24	7.34	6.63
Placement Duration	0.75	0.83	0.75
Trauma	0.08	0.16	-0.12

Estimates generated using survey weights. * $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $p<0.001$

Table 3. OLS Regression Models Predicting Peer and Adult Support and Ordered Logistic Regression Model Predicting Neighborhood Support

	Peer Support	Adult Support	NBH Support
Kinship Care	1.090 (0.133)	1.026 (0.163)	1.266 (0.520)
Non-Relative Foster Care	0.889 (0.133)	0.940 (0.145)	1.075 (0.547)
Child Age	0.959 (0.041)	1.024 (0.055)	0.866 (0.149)
Female	0.887 (0.076)	0.880 (0.082)	1.032 (0.294)
Black	1.052 (0.111)	1.115 (0.111)	1.003 (0.384)
Hispanic	0.937 (0.093)	0.806 (0.090)	0.614 (0.232)
Other Race	1.106 (0.145)	0.965 (0.150)	0.596 (0.262)
Physical Abuse	0.904 (0.087)	0.982 (0.093)	0.741 (0.245)
Sexual Abuse	1.037 (0.135)	1.097 (0.131)	1.236 (0.656)
Caregiver Education	0.929 (0.083)	0.811 (0.094)	1.244 (0.375)
Caregiver Marital Status	1.077 (0.094)	0.952 (0.096)	1.387 (0.439)
Cognitive Disability	0.871 (0.076)	0.895 (0.086)	1.252 (0.381)
Physical Disability	0.975 (0.115)	1.131 (0.136)	0.310** (0.129)
# of Children in Household	1.100** (0.032)	1.046 (0.032)	0.873 (0.091)
Household Income	0.990 (0.014)	1.001 (0.019)	1.061 (0.059)
Placement Duration	0.987 (0.107)	1.022 (0.119)	0.479* (0.179)
Trauma	0.833*** (0.034)	0.876* (0.049)	0.921 (0.127)
Constant	2.941 (1.837)	29.785*** (23.115)	
cut1			0.028 (0.071)
cut2			0.149 (0.381)
Observations	524	524	524

Exponentiated coefficients for ordered logistic regression model; Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression Models Predicting Readiness Class

	Poorly Prepared		Working Track	
	RRR	CI	RRR	CI
Kinship Care	0.241*	[0.063, 0.917]	0.641	[0.167, 2.467]
Non-Relative Foster Care	0.312	[0.088, 1.113]	0.241	[0.056, 1.029]
Peer Support	0.470*	[0.239, 0.924]	0.640	[0.318, 1.286]
Neighborhood Support	1.147	[0.685, 1.920]	0.841	[0.487, 1.452]
Adult Support	0.855	[0.436, 1.679]	1.080	[0.517, 2.256]
Child Age	1.181	[0.725, 1.926]	0.923	[0.530, 1.608]
Female	2.242	[0.985, 5.106]	0.788	[0.333, 1.866]
Black	1.657	[0.619, 4.437]	0.786	[0.267, 2.311]
Hispanic	8.393***	[2.918, 24.140]	6.702***	[2.263, 19.847]
Other Race	2.247	[0.512, 9.861]	3.014	[0.732, 12.406]
Physical Abuse	0.615	[0.256, 1.473]	1.017	[0.399, 2.587]
Sexual Abuse	0.259*	[0.080, 0.839]	0.639	[0.192, 2.131]
Caregiver Education	2.036	[0.804, 5.156]	1.725	[0.651, 4.568]
Caregiver Marital Status	0.782	[0.319, 1.916]	0.681	[0.269, 1.723]
Cognitive Disability	0.649	[0.287, 1.467]	0.429	[0.169, 1.090]
Physical Disability	1.092	[0.365, 3.268]	0.952	[0.257, 3.518]
# of Children in Household	1.083	[0.811, 1.448]	0.929	[0.678, 1.274]
Household Income	0.939	[0.807, 1.094]	1.056	[0.911, 1.224]
Placement Duration	0.674	[0.234, 1.938]	1.352	[0.430, 4.257]
Trauma	1.236	[0.816, 1.872]	1.318	[0.841, 2.065]
Constant	0.157	[0.000, 419.679]	2.561	[0.000, 14,583.075]

Reference = Highly Knowledgeable; *n*=524; RRR= Relative Risk Ratio; CI=Confidence Interval
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

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