

Graduate Research Plan Statement

Background: Children who are victims of interpersonal violence have an elevated risk of engaging in aggressive behavior and perpetrating violence in adolescence and adulthood¹. Youth currently in the foster care system are particularly vulnerable to this cycle², and are considerably more likely than their counterparts to have contact with the criminal justice system. This has created substantial public costs for the United States³. However, while research has shown high rates of criminal involvement within foster populations⁴, not all victimized children engage in violent behavior. In fact, a significant portion of this population demonstrates relatively uncompromised, or “resilient” functioning⁵. Factors such as presence of supportive adults, satisfaction in school, and participation in extracurricular activities were found to be protective factors in high-risk populations⁶. However, access to and enhancement of these resources due to foster placement and stability has been less well studied. Similarly, while risks associated with negative outcomes have been identified, such as previous physical abuse and delinquency in youths’ original families⁷, an examination of how these factors are amplified and affected by the foster care system has not taken place. So while adverse childhood experiences often predict aggressive behavior⁴, there is variability in delinquency rates within this population and little agreement about what is responsible for increased or decreased risk of violent behavior. The lack of understanding of contributions to this variability complicates the development of effective social interventions within the foster care system and adds greatly to economic burden in the United States³.

Proposed Research: To better understand this variability, I aim to examine the relationship between history of violence and rates of delinquency, focusing on the factors that potentially moderate this association. The proposed study will focus on factors which may **place children at increased risk**, but also **factors that may explain resilience** in this population. My analytic strategy will incorporate **both quantitative and qualitative techniques**. Combining these approaches will provide multidimensional understanding of complex issues that cannot be obtained through one method alone⁸. Large scale quantitative research will provide precise foundational information used to conduct the study, analyze the data, identify factors that can be intervened on, and verify the findings. Smaller scale qualitative analyses will expand understanding by exploring subjective factors, identifying other factors not captured in the quantitative data, gaining insight into social processes, and giving voice to participants in the study.

First, I will analyze the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth at Chapin Hall⁹, self-reported survey data collected from 732 study participants when they were 17 or 18 years old. Within this data set, I will examine **history of maltreatment, delinquency, foster care service factors, access to protective factors, and placement satisfaction**. *History of maltreatment* will be assessed by The Lifetime Experiences Questionnaire. *Delinquency* will be measured by surveys regarding history of arrest, conviction for committing a crime, and overnight stay in a correctional facility. This analysis will also include surveys collected regarding victimization in the past 12 months, as well as perpetrator status in the past 12 months. *Foster service factors* will be measured by data regarding age at entry into foster care system, number of placements, type of placements, and total length of stay in foster care system. *Access to protective factors* will be assessed by The MOS Social Support Survey, surveys regarding the impact of foster care on ability to attend school, and information regarding educational attainment, such as last grade level completed. Lastly, *placement satisfaction* will be analyzed by a survey concerning attitudes and satisfaction with most recent placement situations, and a survey regarding the likelihood of turning to the child welfare system for support in the future. A series of linear regression models will explore the effects of maltreatment, foster care service factors, protective access, and satisfaction on delinquency. I aim to **(1) compare delinquency rates for maltreated and**

non-maltreated foster youth, (2) within maltreated foster youth, identify which factors are associated with increased or decreased delinquency, and (3) determine whether foster care service factors, access to protective factors, and placement satisfaction moderate the relationship between violence exposure and violent behavior within the foster care system.

Second, I will conduct qualitative analysis using a smaller sample of foster youth, recruited at University of Illinois at Chicago. I will interview foster care youth (n=50), ages 16 to 18 with a history of maltreatment and delinquency history to *understand self-reported protective and risk factors in the current operation of foster care*. Example questions are "What do you think could be improved in your experience with foster care?", and "what do you feel has been useful to you during your foster care experience?". After transcription of these interviews, a code book will then be developed for the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes in the textual data. This qualitative research will **allow for better insight into social interactions, foster care delivery processes, and subjective factors that may not have been included in the surveys of the Midwest Evaluation**. This qualitative research will generate explanatory models and theories, which will also be useful in the creation of interventions. Working collaboratively with the quantitative data, these interviews will provide valuable insight, allow foster youth to have a voice, and add a more comprehensive analysis to numeric methods.

Hypotheses I hypothesize that *Hypothesis (1)* Maltreated youth will experience higher rates of delinquency. *Hypothesis (2)* Within the population of maltreated youth, higher violence exposure will be associated with lower rates of foster care service factors, access to protective factors, and placement satisfaction. *Hypothesis (3)* Differences in these factors will identify which victims of abuse are more likely to engage in delinquency, and thus strengthen or weaken the association between violence exposure and future violence. *Hypothesis (4)* The qualitative interviews will provide unique insight on complex social issues that will give voice to children in foster care and generate explanatory models that can serve to devise new kinds of interventions.

Intellectual Merit This study will address the relationship between maltreatment and incarceration in a novel way that will advance understanding of variabilities in violent behavior among maltreated foster youth. By interpreting these factors that contribute to variabilities, I will add to research that will determine what is responsible for increased or decreased risk of delinquency and incarceration. As this topic has never been addressed from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, this study will offer comprehensive and unprecedented data that will begin to address the enormity of cycles of violence among foster youth.

Feasibility The Midwest Evaluation is a longitudinal dataset that has already been collected and is publicly available with data use agreements. My proposed qualitative interviews will add an unexplored construct to ongoing studies with minimal burden to participants. Preparation and analysis of this data will be conducted with support from Dr. Kathryn Grant, an expert in maltreatment, or with Dr. Elizabeth Raposa, who has worked extensively with foster youth and juvenile delinquents. This NSF award will permit me to pursue coursework that will be critical to the success of my project and allow for dedicated mentored training. The success of the research will be assessed via communication of these results by publications of peer-reviewed first-authored manuscripts, presentations at research conferences such as the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychology and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, and the development of interventions based on this research.

Broader Impacts The estimated economic burden resulting from cases of child maltreatment in the United States is approximately \$124 billion³. An additional \$5.1 billion is used annually to incarcerate former foster youth in State and Federal prisons¹⁰. Not only are we ethically bound to serve and provide

for these underrepresented children, but we are also bound to advance the progress of science and reduce economic burdens for our nation. This research will identify which factors strengthen or weaken cycles of violence, and outline how to specifically support children within the system who have been exposed to violence. This work will enhance and improve foster care procedures that specifically decrease rates of violent behavior and incarceration. My goal is to ultimately improve foster care service factors, access to protective factors, and placement satisfaction. This research will lead to better interventions, decreased rates of incarceration, and therefore a decreased economic burden for maltreatment in the United States.

References 1. Widom, *Science* 1989 2. McMillen et al. *Child Psychiatry* 2005 3. Fang et al., *Child Abuse Negl.* 2012 4. Font et al. *Crime Delinquency* 2021 5. Jones, *Soc. Work J.* 2012 6. Luthar, *Developmental psychopathology* 2006 7. Datta et al. 2019 8. Bartunek & Seo, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 2002 9. Courtney, Terao, Bost, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of Youth Preparing to Leave State Care* 2011 10. *Administration for Children and Families, Preliminary Fiscal Year 2009* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010