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Motivations to Attend Graduate School for Former Foster Youth and Juvenile Offenders in Placement Facilities and Group Homes

Jessica Parks

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MOTIVATIONS TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL FOR FORMER FOSTER
YOUTH AND JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN PLACEMENT FACILITIES AND
GROUP HOMES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Jessica Parks
May 2022

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the motivating factors for higher education, foster youth and probation youth experienced while in care. The interviews were designed to pinpoint who and what resources, if any, were attributed by the participant as having a positive influence on their attending college. Moreover, the study was purposely directed at individuals who graduated or were working towards a graduate degree or higher. A qualitative data approach was used to interview six participants in order to analyze any themes or similarities amongst the participants. The participants in this study were able to share their personal experiences while in care that inspired them to successfully begin a graduate degree. This study contains information about former foster youths caregivers, placements, social workers, educational journey and life after care. This study also highlights participants' personal experiences including their financial, physical and emotional barriers that they faced aging out of the system and attending college and grad school. The studies limitations were highlighted as low number of participants, lack of diversity amongst degrees, no probation youth participants and diverse experiences while in care. This study introduces the urgency of magnifying the importance of education for these populations and the need for support by social workers, youth caregivers and other faculty that are relied upon to teach them about the benefits of education after care. These participants' personal experiences do not represent all former foster youth and probation youth or future youth in care.

DEDICATION

This research study is dedicated to the children who are raised as ward of the court, as foster youth or as probation youth by their state or county and yearn for support, love and guidance every single day while in care and thereafter. May these findings help you and your future.

This study is dedicated to the six participants that gave their time and shared their stories and personal experiences.

This is also dedicated to my wife and son. You have given me the support and power to be anything, do anything and accomplish anything I put my mind to.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

Introduction

Conversations about college begin long before young adults actually attend, many times as early as kindergarten. Parents, caregivers and schools typically begin speaking of the importance of higher education early so that that child has the opportunity and tools to be successful. It is the job of families and the education system to begin instilling the benefits of college early on, in order to spark interest in the children and prepare them for their future. While college is not the only route to success after highschool, the benefits of college have been well documented. According to Bailey (2014), people who have a college education make more money than people who do not, proving that college can be overwhelmingly beneficial.

Children who are in care lack the consistency that many children may have that aren't wards of the court or placed in care. Therefore, foster and probation youth may not have the resources and support that is comparable to those who have not experienced being in care, making it harder to attend and graduate from a graduate school.

In California, there were a total of 43,181 juvenile arrests made and 81 percent of them were referred to the county probation department in 2019 (Becerra, 2019). Out of these arrests, 27.9 % of those minors were mandated to a lockdown facility and 1.4% were sent to non-lockdown county facilities

(Becerra, 2019). This means that these juveniles were mandated to live in a county governed facility for a disclosed amount of time. These statistics highlight the many juveniles that are placed in government facilities and removed from their normal homes as indicated by the law.

Likewise, over 60,000 children are in foster care in the state of California, with 46 percent of these children being placed in homes that were non-relative households. Among those children in foster care, 4% of these children were placed and lived in a group home facility in 2018 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Lastly, 10% of foster care children were mandated to live in a lockdown facility in 2018 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Like juvenile dependents of the court, many children in foster care do not experience what is considered to be an ordinary household for many parts of their childhood.

Once 18 years old, whether foster youth or juveniles, these teenagers must undergo a transition to adulthood and make decisions about where they will live, how they will pay bills and whether they would like to further their education; or not. Those who were in care as youth or aged out of the system have far more to worry about than those that do not because they spend many times, years away from their own family and relatives. These considerations tell a lot about the challenges one may face when entering adulthood after being in care.

The lack of parental figures, families and other traumas may affect how well one adapts to becoming a functioning adult. Also, the presence of programs, adequate social workers, caregivers and government programs and

psychological support may shape the population to yearn for success, once leaving the system. This dual population, with so much in common has shown to be understudied with very few records and very few success stories.

Purpose of the Study

Learning what resources were available to former foster youth and probation youth can help identify what motivated them to pursue higher education. Identifying individuals who have chosen to pursue education after government care, can help gain knowledge on what experiences can be attributed to educational resilience on such a high level. Focusing on individuals who are pursuing or have completed some form of grad school can help identify what factors set them apart from other individuals who experienced the same background as a minor.

Studies show that 8% of foster youth graduate from college, whereas only 1% of children post-juvenile justice system offenders are able to obtain a college degree (Education | Juvenile Law Center, 2021). With over 424,000 children in foster care in the United States and about 195,000 juveniles in a detention center at one time, these statistics are unacceptable to say the least. Finding out what motivates post-system youth to seek higher education is imperative to gaining the knowledge needed to assist children in the care of the state, during and even after they become adults. What motivates former foster youth and incarcerated juvenile offenders to seek and complete education higher than a bachelor level is

vital to understand when attempting to raise the percentage of graduates that come from a background of government care.

Gathering information that provides insight to the success of those formerly in care can be profitable for government agencies, government workers and those who fund programs directly related to assisting youth in obtaining resources to be successful via adult education.

Understanding this problem further and positively influencing the statistical data of those who do not succeed after care in the system can beneficially impact the adult justice system, crime rates and government spending on assistance programs. According to (Pecora et al., 2006), many foster care “alumni” age out in poor economic situations. In fact, one-third of these populations report to be at or below the poverty level and have no health care insurance. One in five former foster youth report experiencing homelessness post care (Pecora et al., 2006). Studies that offer insight on how or what resources or services drive these individuals to be successful will change Social Work practice in that Child Welfare and Juvenile offender social workers will have more access to information pertaining to their client’s success, after their care by the government system. This can change the number of former youth in care that struggle after the age of eighteen.

Social Workers can begin advocating for their clients' futures long before they are faced with “aging out” of the system. If former foster youth and formerly incarcerated youth are given more resources and support to obtain higher

education, will the percentage of college graduates who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher increase for this population and what factors contribute to their success while in care?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter looks at relevant literature that is associated with children who have been in care whether through the Juvenile Probation Department of Child or Children and Family Services. The subsections will highlight support systems, government programs and other services and personal trials and tribulations reported by the participants of the study.

Children who are currently in the system report the desire to attend college, yet studies show that not many follow these dreams. Seventy percent of foster youth claim that they would like to attend a post-secondary college level program after highschool, yet only 39% of them actually enroll and only 10% of those graduates from an associate or bachelor's degree program before the age of twenty-five (Piel, 2018).

Many issues that youth face while in care affect them long term, making college an unrealistic goal. According to Raines & Talapatra (2019), formerly incarcerated youth face obstacles like poor social support, substance abuse, criminal arrest records, low-income status and mental health challenges. These barriers may make attending and graduating from college unattainable.

Raines & Talapatra (2019), note that college and career readiness is the single most challenging aspect about transitioning back into society for young juvenile offenders who age out of the system as adults. He notes that these

young adults are concerned after their release from detention, about their personal history of arrest records, lack of social support, substance abuse issues, low economic status and mental health struggles (Raines & Talapatra, 2019) leading to little time to focus on education in their future. Raines & Talapatra (2019), also points out that statistics show there is a low rate of involvement by formerly incarcerated youth in education or work.

Another study found that experiences of neglect, lack of education, and youth irresponsibility were found to impact a child's desire to attend school post care (Kremer & Vaughn, 2018). They also found that the opinions that the juvenile's parents or caregivers had on college and whether they attended or not, significantly impacted the child's opinions and goals for higher education (Kremer & Vaughn, 2018).

Being unprepared for the responsibilities of adulthood, can adversely affect college readiness for those who were formerly in the system. Piel (2018), notes that these former youth are faced with responsibilities like housing, employment and health care that leaves education a distant objective. These challenges provide a barrier in pursuing higher education more, compared to young adults who do not spend any time in foster or government care and have the support of consistent caregivers and other resources.

According to Piel (2018), the uncertainty that foster youth face while in care, directly affects their ability to pursue and complete higher education during adulthood. Lacking the tools they need when leaving care, changes their ability to

attend school because they are facing other obstacles like financial, employment and housing problems, having to provide care for children, lack of social and emotional support, and the ability to understand how to navigate higher education (Piel, 2018). Also, Heins et al. (2005) says, maltreatment, growing up without parents, and other factors can negatively impact a child's academic success.

Lastly, Hallet (2008), says trauma can affect young adults aging out of care and their desire to pursue higher education. One study included eighteen former foster youth who participated in one-on-one interviews with Hallet. The college students reported being affected by childhood traumas, claiming the impact of their experiences caused them to suffer during their educational programs. Some symptoms reported by the youth were tension and worries about whether going back to school was the right thing to do. These young adults reported worrying about life responsibilities like homelessness, abuse and neglect and lack of social networks as being more of a worry than getting a degree and/or focusing on education. They also reported not understanding how to navigate a college campus and curriculum (Hallett, Westland & Mo, 2018). The study concludes by highlighting that the traumas that these youth experienced during their time in foster care adversely affected them, even in their college years.

Other studies have offered evidence that not all youth are ill prepared for the real world. Studies like (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, 2019) reported

that youth exiting the system were more ready to be on their own than we would think. After conducting a systematic review of thirty-seven eligible studies, they reported that these youth were confident about their journey as adults and reported having the necessary skills to be successful on their own. The young adults gave credit to the caregivers they spent time with, features of the care they were placed in, a good education and being provided a safe life and social support while in care. These denominators are attributed to their ability to be successful (Häggman-Laitila, Saloekkilä & Karki, 2019). Also, Heins et al. (2005), notes that individual, family, and community levels all contribute to the success of showing interest in and beginning college as adults. As long as those in care experienced these aspects, Heins says they have the opportunity to be successful academically, later in life.

Foster Youth: Obtaining a 4-Year Degree

Prior studies like Heins et al. (2005), show that there is research that shows that foster youth do indeed begin college, but how many youth actually graduate with a 4 year degree or farther and what contributions during their time in care pushed them to do so? Morton (2017), agrees that many youth aspire to attend college, yet most do not graduate. Also, many literature reviews, like those available in previous sections, recognize the experiences that lead a young child to want to attend college or traumas that get in the way of that success, but very little literature highlights how many individuals complete college. According to Morton (2017), only 3-11% of former foster youth graduate from a 4-year college.

Morton (2017), sought information from former foster children in transitional living assistance programs, post foster care. Out of all the young adults who participated in the study and signed up for college, less than half graduated. The factors reported by these young adults that were successful and that led to the ability to graduate without letting the challenges that foster youth face disrupt their academic goals were mental health support and counseling, while in care and before graduation (Morton, 2017).

Foster Youth compared to Juvenile Probation Youth

While there is literature on former foster youth and their post care educational journeys, there is little information on juvenile offenders who were raised in court appointed group homes alike. Juvenile offenders remanded to group homes are held in many of the same facilities that foster care youth are, meaning they receive the same upbringing. These individuals who are ward of the courts, are also under the jurisdiction of the states and raised in a system with the same social workers and caretakers. Sadly, probation youth who also experience time in care are even less likely to attend and successfully graduate from higher education programs. These factors make it just as important to gather data from those individuals as well to fully understand how children raised by government programs function upon release or becoming a legal adult. More research can help define their similarities or differences and the likelihood that these individuals successfully complete college and how they are able to get there.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

When attempting to understand the effects that the juvenile or foster care system had on the participants in this study, a Psychodynamic theory can be used. Sigmund Freud claimed that all human thoughts and behaviors are influenced by childhood traumas and dysfunctions. Moreover, he believed that social bonds and relationships affect how we progress through life and how we feel about ourselves (Hepworth, Strom-Gottfried, Rooney & Rooney, 2017). These theories can offer plenty of insight on how juveniles are impacted by being away from their own families, growing up in an environment that is not blood related, and/or dealing with other traumas, stressors and struggles from being in care. Lastly, a psychodynamic theory can offer an understanding for those individuals who flourished while in foster care and were given the resources they needed to not only show interest in higher education, but complete a degree.

Also, considering Albert Bandura's social learning theory, can help analyze how the adult figures in or not in the participants' life, shaped their own views and behaviors. Albert recognizes that dysfunctional behavior is learned and can be unlearned. Even though participants experienced traumas in their younger years, it is important to know if receiving support helped them work through their past and get on a path of success, post care (Hepworth, Strom-Gottfried, Rooney & Rooney, 2017).

Lastly, understanding trauma informed care when working with young adults who have a troubled past will provide comprehension when learning about

each participant's past and how it has affected them over the years.

Understanding trauma and how to deal with it, can help better achieve an understanding of what resources and intervention methods allowed the individuals to function in normal society and graduate for a graduate program.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study seeks to identify what factors contributed to higher education motivation amongst Foster Youth and Juvenile Offenders that were dependents of the court. The study explored the circumstances that influenced individuals post care to seek and complete a postgraduate degree. The study gaged how these individuals' experiences as children in care affected their choices as graduate students and what if any factors attributed to their successes. This chapter will highlight the studies design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis of the research conducted.

Study Design

The research design used during this study was qualitative research. Qualitative research allows data to be collected in descriptive words. This was helpful in gaining explicit details of what the determining factors were while in care that influenced these individuals to go back to school and graduate as a college student.

Using a qualitative study design caused certain limitations. Certain biases are more apparent in qualitative designs than in quantitative studies. Another limitation of the qualitative study design was the lack of rapport with researchers

and participants. This may have caused the participant to be less open when sharing his/her story. Also, interviews took place online which made the study less personable. Lastly, the study was done in a specific time frame that limited the researcher. This may have caused the study to be less reputable.

Further, limitations of this study include the specifications to qualify to be interviewed. Due to the specific criteria that the participants were required to meet, it was difficult to gather willing participants to be interviewed.

Data was gathered via live zoom interviews. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed via zoom.

Sampling

A total of 6 participants were interviewed for this study. Individuals were recruited for this study via Social Work Facebook groups, Grad School Facebook groups and Instagram pages.

The sampling method used for this study was snowball sampling. This method was used in an attempt to recruit enough participants to conduct a quality study. Using this method allowed the recruitment of six participants. One participant suggested their brother for the study, but he did not end up participating. Another participant was recruited via word of mouth. The remaining participants answered the social media posts that contained qualifications for this research. The goal of the researcher was to have 15 people or more to interview.

Due to the concise qualifications for participation in this study and the time restraints, the researcher was only able to interview six participants.

Data Collection and Instruments

The collection of qualitative data was used to perform this research study. The purpose of using qualitative data with participants in this particular study was to gain access to detailed information about each participant's life while in care and throughout their college journey.

The individuals in this study, who were previously in the system as children and are now in a Master's degree program, have graduated from a master's degree program or are in a Doctoral program meet the inclusion requirements for this study. Because this study is focusing on individuals who have decided to go to greater lengths beyond a bachelor's degree, those who are working on their undergrad were not considered for this study. Individuals were allowed to participate if they have already graduated with a bachelor's degree and are already accepted into a Master's program of any major. The experiences, support and any influencing services that one experienced in care is the dependent variable of this study. The college graduate and/or participant is the independent variable in this study.

The zoom transcription service was used to collect the data needed. The data was transcribed in order to understand the similarities and differences of the participants' stories while in care.

The questions chosen for these interviews were intended to capture the details of each participant's time in care, the resources that they were given, the people who influenced them and any barriers they have faced but overcome. Questions like, "As a minor between the ages of 12 and 18, were you in foster care or institutional care mandated by the courts? What type of care were you in? (relative care, non-relative care, adopted, placement facility, mental health facility, group home, juvenile hall facility)" allowed the researcher to identify the differences between former foster youths experiences. These differences can explain what positive and negative factors influenced their goals and what challenges emerged from their history in the foster care system. Also, asking the participants during the interview a question like "At what specific ages were you in care?" can determine the differences between participants. One participant may have spent more years in foster homes or other facilities that could have affected their determination to go to college, whereas another participant may have only spent one year in care and then went back home to their families.

Other questions asked during the face-to-face interviews pertained to basic demographics, level of graduation (must be bachelor's degree or higher), time in care as a child and other questions about that time frame. Also, the individual was asked if they "aged out" of the system at 18 and whether or not they took advantage of any post care services or resources thereafter. Lastly, participants were asked if they were helped by any resources that were made available to them while in care to get into college. Understanding whether social

workers, other faculty, caregivers, judges or any other individuals and their involvement in their college education was a key factor in this study.

The first questions pertained to basic demographics about each participant like race, age and gender. Following these demographic questions was the question “Did you graduate with a bachelor's degree or higher?”, This question was to determine the eligibility of each participant in this particular study. All the remaining questions were open ended questions in hopes to gather explicit details about each participant's experience while in care and in college.

Procedures

Facebook posts were placed in Social Work groups in order to find individuals who meet the qualifications and are interested in participating. Research information was posted in Facebook groups that had social workers, graduate students and those who were currently enrolled in a graduate school program in order to gather individuals to interview for this study.

Dates and times for personal interviews were issued to each interested participant. Those participants were asked to choose a date and time that best fit their availability. The slots were reserved for 20-minute sessions. The researcher sent each participant who agreed to participate an interview invitation via zoom. The participants were sent consent forms through email communication prior to the in-person interview.

All interviews were conducted online via zoom. During the beginning of each interview, participants were advised of confidentiality and reporting policies and

what would take place during the interview. The participants were informed that the discussions would be recorded and that by continuing on with the interview they agreed to the informed consent. The researcher informed the participant that a short survey would be conducted that contained questions about their time in care as a youth and their educational journey thereafter prior to the beginning of the zoom interview. Upon closing, the participant was thanked for their time and participation.

Protection of Human Subjects

The protocol used for the protection of human subjects for this study was approved by the California State University of San Bernardino Institutional Review Board. All information provided by participants is protected by confidentiality agreements. The information provided was used only for the purpose of this study and nothing more. Also, no one else has access to the participants personal information. Each participant's data has not been saved under their real name. Instead, a pseudo name has been chosen and used for the duration of the work with the research participants. The audio recordings obtained have been stored in a cloud-based storage space with a password and crypto protection. Pseudo names have been used to identify each participant. All information provided and stored will be saved for three years to meet the guidelines of the IRB upon completion of the study.

Data Analysis

The recordings were examined for the purpose of data analysis to determine the thesis of this study. The information was transcribed and printed into word format.

The word documents have been combed through in an attempt to identify similarities and key points amongst participants paying special attention to how their time in care affected their future. Also, considering the demographics of each child, and how their personal stories differ, also helped to determine any disparities of data collected. As noted in limitations, because each participant's experience differed, the data collected is comparable. Nonetheless, the themes in the transcripts should help identify what support systems helped each grad student meet their educational goals.

Summary

This study was conducted in order to learn about the connection between individuals raised in a government system like foster care or probation facilities and higher education. The purpose of the study was to find out how many individuals who were formerly in care, seek higher education and actually graduate and then continue to pursue a master's degree or higher. Also, the study sought to pinpoint what factors attributed to the participants' success passed a bachelor's degree. Most importantly, the study sought to identify whether the participants previously in care, do recognize their care by the government system as having any impact on obtaining a degree.

The methods of this study allowed the researcher to identify similar factors that the participants attributed to their time in care. Utilizing an interview process has allowed the researcher to gain access to in depth, descriptive information that is concise to the individual participant's story. Lastly, the data that has been collected throughout the interviews can be used to supply the Social Work world with information that tells how a child's upbringing when in the system, affects their desires to be educationally motivated and ultimately successful as adults.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

In the following chapters results of this study will be defined by subsections including factors that supported college, participant characteristics and background, the pursuit of higher education: master's degree or doctorate degree, social workers influence on higher education attainment, financial assistance, barriers to college, other influential individuals, disruptive factors, participant recommendations, significant findings, implications and limitations and conclusions.

Six interviews were conducted between the months of January 2022 and March 2022, via zoom and transcribed through the zoom app. The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour depending on the length of the participants' answers.

Qualitative data analysis was used to collect the data that the participants shared. The participants were asked demographic questions that included their age, ethnicity, the participants age while in care and the state they were in care in. After basic demographic questions were asked, the participant was then interviewed about their time in care, influential factors to pursue education and deterring factors that they experienced during that time. Also, participants were asked to identify any barriers that they have faced that made considering education and/or pursuing education difficult for them. Lastly, participants were

asked to identify any steps that those who work with foster or probation youth, could take to support our youth. Participants were asked how they could do a better job in the future, to make sure that those who are in the system are more likely to attend college, and more likely to seek a master's degree or higher after having involvement with the system.

Participant Characteristics and Background

Six interviews were conducted with participants who will be identified using numbers 1-6 to respect their privacy. Participants names will be #1, #2, #3, #4, #5 and #6. In this study Participants #1, #3, #4 and #5 were Hispanic. Participant #2 was Caucasian and Participant #6 was African American. Participant #1 was male, and the rest were of female gender. The ages of the participants were #1: 36, #2: 46, #3: 39, #4: 36 and #5: 32. Participants #1 and #5 were in in the state of California, #4 was in care in Colorado and California, #6 was in care in Florida and #2 was in care in Minnesota. All six participants were in foster care after being removed from their homes by the department of CPS. Participant #4 was the only individual in this study who had a probation record, but she was never placed in a facility due to any criminal convictions. I was unable to recruit any former probation youth that were in group homes or placements due to juvenile offenses.

All six participants reported being placed in at least one foster care home with a non-relative caregiver at any given time while in care. Participants #1,3,4 and 5 were also placed in relative care at some point during their involvement

with the system. Participant #3 was placed with their other parent (biological father) after being removed from their home by Children and Family services. Lastly, participant #2 left care and lived with a family member and then a teacher that was not approved of by the courts. Her experiences in the care of these individuals were also included in the data. Participants #4 and #5 were reunited with their biological mother prior to turning 18 and underwent a reunification process which terminated any care from the system. All of the participants noted CPS and Social Worker involvement throughout their childhood.

Participant #3 maxed out of care at the age of 18. The five other participants left foster care at or before age 18. Participants 1-3 graduated highschool during their time in care. Participant #5 did not graduate highschool but did obtain a highschool diploma from an accredited adult school. Participants #4 and #6 graduated from high school on schedule after leaving foster care. No participants in this study obtained a GED instead of a highschool diploma.

None of the participants in this study participated in the Independent Living Program or a program that resembled the current California initiative for foster youth that are over the age of 18. Participants #1,2,3 and 5 claimed that they did not know of any program for after care. Participant # 4 said they did know of the program but did not utilize it. Participant #2 said the program was not in existence during her time in care.

When asking the participants about their educational transition to undergraduate school, participants 2,3,4 and 5 reported attending a community

college prior to attending a university. Participants #1 and #6 reported going directly to a four-year college and graduating.

During the time of this study, all six participants were pursuing or had already obtained a Master of Social Work degree. Participants #1 and #6 also had obtained an LCSW. Participant #3 is currently working on obtaining their LCSW. #4 and #5 are currently enrolled in an MSW program. Participant #2 is working on obtaining a doctoral degree.

Contributing Factors that Supported College

The participants were asked to share what contributing factors, during their time in care, supported a college degree. Each participant highlighted the factors that they recall motivating them to go to college. These factors include personal and outside motivations.

Participants 1,2,5 and 6 highlighted lack of money as a motivator to return to school. Participant #2 stated that she was homeless, participants #1 and #2 stated they had no money after turning 18, and #5 stated that she felt “she would not get anywhere without a degree in life”. Participant #6 stated that “education was her only option”.

Participants #1 and #3 attributed influential people in their lives as factors of going to college, whereas participants #2 and #6 claimed that negative life experiences made them want to change their path and pursue college. Lastly, the remaining participants #4 and #5 highlighted other individuals as being their reason to attend college after care.

The Pursuit of Higher Education- Master's Degree or Doctorate

This study not only examined determining factors for individuals in care to pursue a college degree but concentrated on the 1% of former foster or probation youth that decided to pursue higher education after their bachelor's degree. The point of studying those who went to the next level of education was to highlight factors, if any, that this one percent of the foster youth/ probation youth experienced. Previous studies have gathered data that show how many former foster youth have graduated from highschool or who attend college. Some studies gather data about getting a bachelor's degree after foster care. Sadly, there are very limited studies on foster youth or probation youth who attend a Master's program or higher after getting a bachelor's degree.

There are not enough studies that have reported on what factors have added to the success of these students. Furthermore, there are no studies that highlight what factors in care convinced these former youth to get a grad degree. With statistics against them, and many former youths who have a history of being in care being expected by society to be another incarceration statistic, this study could collect data to show what a success story was determined by.

Furthermore, the importance of gathering this information is to support future youth in care to pursue an education and place goals that are not limited to an undergraduate degree. Studies can support future youth and the individuals who work with them by showing them that success is possible with the right resources and support system.

Social Workers Influence on Higher Education Attainment

All participants in this study were asked to share their experiences with the social workers that they met while in care and how they influenced their college education. The participants were asked whether any of their assigned social workers ever spoke to them about college.

Participant #1 gave praise to his social worker naming her the most influential person in his life. He stated that she was the most amazing person he had ever met. He claims that she built a bond with him and his brothers, advocated for them when they were in care and stayed with them for over four years as their social worker. He claims that she was the main reason that he pursued an education after care.

Participant # 5 claimed that she did have one social worker in her life that she remembers from when she was in care. She said that she told herself that “if she could do it, so could I”. She attributes this social worker to opening her up to the idea of pursuing social work as a career later in life.

The remaining participants #2, 3 and 4 reported that not a single Social Worker mentioned the pursuit of an education after high school. Participant #4 did remember a particular social worker and described her as being “kind”. The participant remembered thinking to herself “I want to be just like her”, but does not ever recall this Social Worker speaking to her about college.

Financial Assistance

All six participants were Financial Aid recipients during their undergraduate degree. Participants 1, 3 and 5 received funding specifically for being a foster youth. Participant #3 received a scholarship on top of other financial aid.

Participant #2 reported receiving monies from the county office and having to apply for loans on top of receiving financial aid. Participant #5 was insisting that the financial support she received during her time in college was the number one factor in her success. She clarified that every foster youth should have access and knowledge of funding available to them for college. She also added that there should be scholarships available for all levels of education including Master's and Doctorate degrees. Participants 2, 3 and 4 agreed that having more information about monies available to those previously in care would be helpful for those who are considering or already attending college.

Barriers to Higher Education

I asked all participants to highlight any barriers they have encountered that made pursuing a college degree difficult for them. These barriers may have had to do with their time in care thereafter. The barriers highlighted included financial, emotional and personal limitations that made getting a degree after care difficult.

Participant #1 did not feel like he faced many barriers when pursuing higher education because he had family members who supported him and advocated for attending college. He described his family members as "very education oriented". He mentioned barriers that he faced as being affiliated with

his own negative mental health. He described personal issues that consisted of anger, rage, anxiety, trauma and not being supported.

Participant #2 listed her barriers as having a child at a young age, having to work to survive and being in debt. Participant #2 also mentioned mental health barriers such as depression. She shared that it was hard to go to school when she had to focus on surviving and getting her basic needs met.

Participant #3 highlighted lack of knowledge as being a barrier to college. She said that she “did not know how to get into college and the idea felt very foreign”. She mentioned that completing normal tasks like signing up for financial aid was hard, because she had no parental figures there to help her do it or teach her how to. She also mentioned lack of money as a barrier when pursuing higher education. Lastly, Participant #3 stated that a big barrier for her was her mental health. She highlighted anger, mistrust, lack of support and even suicide attempts and ideations as being barriers for being successful and returning and attending college.

Participant #4 mentioned homelessness as being a barrier to pursue higher education. She shared with me that she had to “get married to have somewhere to live”. She also mentioned that her own personal mental health set a barrier during her journey to obtain college degrees. She highlights losing family members to suicide and a traumatic childhood as affecting her mental health.

Participant #5 agrees that money was a personal barrier when pursuing college. She also mentioned her own mental health as being a barrier sharing those past familial traumas really affected her goals to return to school.

Lastly, participant #6 said that lack of money was her main barrier and she had to “work to survive” so returning to school was difficult for her. She shared that at one point she was working three jobs just to pay her bills.

The participants were asked to identify any other individuals that were influential to them seeking a college education while they were in care. They were asked to think about those who were involved, such as judges, faculty, staff, educators, advocates, programs, foster parents and other minors in care that were impactful. Participants 1,3 and 6 mentioned teachers that they met in school have influenced their seeking degrees. Participant #3 lived with her teacher for a short time and mentioned how significant her involvement in her life was and how much her contributions influenced her to pursue higher education. Participants 1 and 6 mentioned having teachers involved in their lives during highschool that positively influenced their decision to attend college after care. Participant #4 attributed her return to college to her friend's mother in highschool. She mentioned that this person even helped her apply for a foster youth scholarship that she was granted. Participant #3 accredited a family member, specifically her uncle’s success after education. She said he was her inspiration

to attend college. Lastly, #2 reported that there were no other outside influences that spoke to her about college.

Disruptive Factors

Participants were asked about factors during their time in care that made them feel like they would not be able to go back to school and be successful. Specifically, the participants were asked to share if they were negatively impacted by unhelpful staff, county workers, educators or faculty while in care. All six individuals were unable to recall any situations that they remember to be detrimental to seeking college that involved any of these individuals. This could be a key factor to the individuals seeking and having success in college. Further studies may be used to identify the differences between former foster and probation youth who were not negatively impacted by workers et al. who cared for them in comparison to those former youth who were. Also, further studies may show that former foster youth who were negatively impacted by those who were responsible for them while in care, were unable to successfully attend or complete college in adulthood.

Some participants did highlight other individuals' circumstances that negatively impacted them while in care. Participant #5 highlighted biological family as being a determinant factor to returning to school. She shared that her biological mother still does not discuss her success in college. She also shared that because her Master's degree is in Social Work, her biological mother refuses to talk about her education with her due to their past involvement with Children

and Family Services. Participant #5 stated that these barriers have made her higher education journey difficult.

Participant #6 mentioned that no one deterred them, but no one supported their return either, while in care. She shared that she did not have anyone in her life to teach her anything about adulthood and because of this she felt that she did not have the help she could have had in another situation.

Lastly, participant #2 said that falling behind in school and not having the support needed to catch up, was an intercepting factor in feeling confident to return to college. She described going to school as a youth as difficult because of constantly being moved from foster home to foster home. These moves caused her to fall behind in her studies and she did not have the support she needed from teachers, faculty, staff, social workers or family figures to help get caught up. These factors were disruptions in her youth that made it hard to consider a return to pursue higher education.

Participation Recommendations

The final question asked to participants was an opinion pertaining to future youth in care. The participants were asked what kinds of things could be done for youth in care to support their success and attribute to their interest in pursuing higher education. The participants were also asked to elaborate on what they needed when they were youth in care.

All the participants mentioned that the most important thing that individuals who work with children in care can do to influence them to attend college is to

offer “more support”. This support can be described as “familial-like support” that a normal family may offer. Participants 2 and 5 described this support as making sure that the kids in care did not have to worry about food, shelter, money, family issues and were able to focus on important things like preparing for college. Participants 1 through 5 mentioned the importance of supporting the children in care more emotionally, describing the journey as “hard enough”. Participants 2,3 and 6 highlighted the importance of focusing more on the future and speaking to kids in care more about the future and what is yet to come. Participant #5 mentioned the need for policy change within the system to better help the children. That same participant, along with three others, mentioned the need for more financial support for the individuals to be able to meet their basic needs and focus on their education. Participants 2,3 and 4 mentioned that giving kids in care “hope” was an important aspect of making them feel capable and cared for to accomplish their educational goals and seek higher education.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to examine individuals who were in state care and compare their stories and experiences that led up to them pursuing higher education. The experiences of the participants are necessary to understand what factors contributed to the participants' quest and completion of higher education. Dissecting and understanding the important factors, individuals and resources that contributed to the participants success, may help identify needs of future foster youth. By meeting these needs and providing these resources, it is possible that statistically, more foster youth and juvenile offenders in placement facilities attain higher education. The insights gained from this study may help other youth in the future to be successful.

The most significant result of this study was the agreement amongst the participants when asked what those who work with youth in care can do to better support them and guide them to pursuing a college degree. The participants were asked what they thought could be done for future youth in care. The question asked to participants was “What do you think should be done to encourage or support people who have been in foster care or residential/institutional care to get a graduate degree?” The participants shared their personal opinions on what they felt was necessary to guide more youth towards a college education. The findings of the study showed that six out of six

participants believed that these youth need more support while in care and after as an adult who was previously in the system. The support that was mentioned included Social Workers doing their part by introducing the children to the importance of college from a young age. The participants were passionate about advocating for the importance of building strong bonds with the children in care and teaching them life skills like the importance of college. The need for emotional support from the faculty that works with these minors was strongly advocated for by participants in this study. The answer to this research study according to the participants is to supply youth in care with the needed support that they are lacking after being removed from their biological families' homes', This study suggests that replacing those gaps with Social Workers who provide support is key to successful adults. This research advocates for the need for a more communicative bond between Social Worker and youth as well as supporting them emotionally and financially as they explore their future and the possibility of attending and completing college.

I anticipated that the study would highlight the importance of a better support system for the youth in care. According to Raines and Talapatra (2019), a poor support system can cause many problems for youth that face a childhood in the foster care or probation system. Piel (2018) noted that children must be prepared for a college journey and many foster youths do not have the basic support and needs met to do so. By adding additional support to these youth from those who are "filling in" for their biological families like faculty, foster

parents and social workers, more foster and probation youth may attend and be successful college graduates and even pursue higher education. Support from those individuals were described by participants as having access to more tools and resources, having more education on the importance of college from their caregivers, less worries about basic needs, more guidance and the financial ability to do so.

Implications and Limitations

Some unanticipated findings and important details that were found in this study included lack of participants, lack of probation youth, lack of diversity in master's degrees and different experiences and living arrangements while in care.

The study was to include 15 participants that either had already received or were in the process of receiving a graduate degree. Due to the nature of the topic, I was only able to interview 6 individuals who met the study qualifications. Further studies that included more participants can be helpful in gathering higher quality information about former foster youths' motivations to attend graduate school.

All the participants in this study had a graduate degree or were pursuing a graduate degree in Social Work. Many of the participants pursued higher education, specifically in Social Work because of their experiences as youth in care. Possibly, adding individuals with master's degrees in other majors may change the results or add to them. Only interviewing Social Workers may have

caused some limitations due to the nature of the study and the subject matter. Further studies with a diverse population of participants who obtained a diverse collection of degrees may change the study's results and data.

I also found that due to the many different circumstances of a child in care and how no child's experience is similar, it is hard to compare the results for studies with similar questions. In this study, it is important to note that one participant may have been placed with relatives after being removed from the care of their biological parents whereas another participant may have been placed in several non-relative foster homes and even government run placement facilities. The treatment, support and care could widely differ between these individuals making the results hard to dissect. Also, If a participant still had close contact with family members and loved ones while in care, ie. spent lots of time with their maternal or paternal family members, had supportive brothers and sisters or even remained close to their biological parents, their results may differ from a participant who had no blood family involvement and did not have connections like that of the other participant. Just these circumstances in themselves could greatly determine an individual's outcome. Also, further studies with a larger range of participants can help narrow down what support measures need to be taken to help more foster youth and probation youth pursue and graduate from college.

Lastly, it was the goal of this study to also include the stories and interviews of children who were in probation facilities as youth. These individuals

face the same obstacles as foster youth because they too may become ward of the court and spend time in placement facilities that include but are not limited to juvenile hall facilities, mental health facilities, 6 and 12 bed group home facilities and so on. Sadly, this population makes up only 1% of the undergrad population. The statistics on probation youth who make it to a graduate level are non-existent hence why it was the attempt of this study to include their stories in this data as well. Unfortunately, it was not possible to gather anyone who met these criteria. Only further research can identify the numbers of graduates that belong to this population. The inability to find participants from this population further limits the data in this research study.

Conclusion

This study aimed at identifying the motivating factors that foster youth and probation youth experienced while in care. The interviews were designed to pinpoint who and what resources, if any, were attributed by the participant as having a positive influence on their attending college. Moreso, the study was purposely directed at individuals who graduated or were working towards a graduate degree or higher. A qualitative data approach was used to interview 6 participants in order to analyze any themes or similarities amongst the participants. The participants in this study were able to share their personal experiences while in care and during their educational journeys. The study limitations were highlighted as low number of participants, lack of diversity amongst degrees, no probation youth participants and diverse experiences while

in care. This study introduces the urgency of magnifying the importance of education for these populations and the need for support by Social Workers, caregivers and other faculty that these youth rely on to teach them about the benefits of education after care. These participants' personal experiences do not represent all former foster youth and probation youth or future youth in care.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Created By Jessica Parks

1. Are you currently enrolled in a grad program, or have you graduated from a graduate program? If so, what program?
2. What is your age at this time?
3. What do you consider to be your ethnicity?
4. As a minor between the ages of 12 and 18, were you in foster care or institutional care mandated by the courts? What type of care were you in? (relative care, non-relative care, adopted, placement facility, mental health facility, group home, juvenile hall facility)
5. At what specific ages were you in care?
6. In what state were you in care?
7. Please tell me about your high school education. Did you graduate high school while in care or after you left care?
8. Did you graduate with a High School diploma or GED? If a GED, how old were you when you obtained the GED?
9. Did you participate in ILP [Independent Living Program] services or after care services through the county as an adult? IF so, what was the impact of the ILP?
10. Did you graduate from a Four-Year College?
11. What contributing factors made you seek a college education?
12. Looking back to when you were in care, who talked to you about going to college?
13. Did any other individuals influence you to pursue an education during your time in care as a minor: judges, faculty, staff, educators, advocates, programs, foster parents, other minors in care? If so, how did they influence you?
14. Did you receive any financial assistance or support to pursue your degree? If so, what was it and how did you hear about the support you received?

15. When did you first think that you were interested in obtaining a master's degree /doctoral degree?

16. What prompted you to consider getting a master's degree /doctoral degree?

17. Who, if anyone, took active steps to prepare you for a graduate degree? What did they do to support you?

18. What were the barriers you encountered in applying for a graduate degree?

19. What were the barriers you encountered in being in a graduate degree program?

20. What was most helpful to you in applying for a graduate degree?

21. What was most helpful to you in being in a graduate program.

22. What do you think should be done to encourage or support people who have been in foster care or residential/institutional care to get a graduate degree?

23. Did any other individuals influence you to pursue an education during your time in care as a minor? (ie. Judges, faculty, staff, educators. Advocates, programs, foster parents, or other minors in care?)

24. Did any factors in care deter you from wanting to return to school for a graduate degree? (ie. unhelpful staff, county workers, educators or faculty or other experiences?)

25. Did anyone else influence your decision to return to school and graduate that is not related to your time in care? (IE. biological parents, friends, siblings)

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the factors contributing to the academic success on a master's degree level or higher, of individuals previously in care and who are dependents of the court whether foster youth or probation youth. The study is being conducted by Jessica Parks, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Laurie Smith, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the factors that led foster youth/ probation youth to seek higher education on a master's degree or doctorate level.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked demographic information. They will also be asked questions that relate to the type of care, length of care and factors and experiences during their time in care. Participants will also be asked about other individuals like foster parents, social workers, teachers, and other applicable county officials who had an impact on their decisions to attend grad school or higher.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential, and data will only be used to support results for this study.

DURATION: The interview will take approximately 20 minutes per participant.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation at any time during the interview process.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participate in this study.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Laurie Smith at 909-537-3837

I agree to have this interview be video and audio recorded: _____ YES _____ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

January 11, 2022

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2022-99

Laurie Smith Jessica Parks
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
[5500 University Parkway](#)
[San Bernardino, California 92407](#)

Dear Laurie Smith Jessica Parks:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Indicators of Educational Resilience in Former Foster Youth and Juvenile Offenders" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- **Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.**
- **Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.**
- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-99 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND:MG

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