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From Adversity to Homelessness: Unraveling the Impact of Pre-Foster Care Experiences

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ABSTRACT: Despite considerable assistance aimed at preparing youth in foster care to transition into adulthood, former foster care children are at an elevated risk of homelessness. This study evaluates the relationship between traumas experienced prior to entering the foster care system and homelessness in adulthood. Previous studies have established a significant correlation between childhood involvement in the foster care system and adverse life outcomes in later stages of life. However, since many children are placed in foster care due to traumatic circumstances, it remains unclear whether the pre-existing traumas that led to their placement in foster care or the traumas they experienced while in foster care make a greater contribution to the reported adverse life outcomes in adulthood. I hypothesized that pre-existing trauma plays a larger role in adult homelessness than trauma experienced in the foster care system. Adults who spent time in foster care were surveyed regarding traumas and stressors they experienced prior to being placed in the foster care system. Four out of ten pre-exposure factors were found to significantly increase the likelihood of being homeless in adulthood: abuse, parental incarceration, single-parent households, and parental divorce. This finding provides a potential roadmap for targeted mental health interventions while children are in the foster care system to address previous trauma. Such interventions may reduce the incidence of homelessness in this vulnerable population.
KEYWORDS: Clinical and Developmental Psychology; Cognitive Psychology; Homelessness; Foster Care.

Introduction

Homelessness is an epidemic that harms people unfortunate enough to experience it and the communities they struggle to live in. State child welfare agencies offer foster care services to children who require a safe, temporary living arrangement due to various circumstances. Adults who spent time in foster care as youth are at an elevated risk of homelessness.[1] This is significant because this elevated risk directly impacts the well-being and prospects of vulnerable youth and disadvantaged populations. The relationship between a history of being in the foster care system and homelessness perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage that stretches across generations.[2] Without effective intervention, these youth who have spent time in foster care face a higher risk of adverse life outcomes such as homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues, incarceration, and limited access to education and employment opportunities.[3] These factors burden social services, public health, and criminal justice systems.

The link between exposure to the US foster care system and adult homelessness has been documented in multiple large-scale studies.[1] Moreover, social services may remove children from the custody of homeless parents.[4] These complex interactions between homelessness and the foster care system make it difficult for policymakers to help disadvantaged foster youth overcome social, economic, and emotional barriers to positive life outcomes as they age out of foster programs. There are numerous programs designed to help youth who are aging out of foster care transition to independent living, but the increased risk of homelessness for former foster youth remains.[5] The risk of homelessness for former foster youth is greater than four times that of the general population.[1] Moreover, the number of youths placed in the foster care system peaked at over 440,000 in 2017 but has remained near 400,000 for over a decade.[4,6,7]

One of the earliest programs focused on foster care in the United States, known as the Free Foster Home Movement, was established by Charles Loring Brace in 1853.[8] The Free Foster Home Movement placed orphaned children in the care of farmers and tradesmen.[8] Private agencies remained the primary providers of foster care services until the 1960s, when federal funding was authorized to establish state-run social welfare programs, facilitating temporary care for children who could not remain with their parents due to various circumstances.[8] The goal of the foster care system is to provide these children with temporary shelter and place them in a safe, stable, and nurturing environment until they can either be returned home or placed in a new home through adoption. High-quality care during childhood is essential for cognitive development and behavioral outcomes.[9] However, foster care programs have widely failed at preventing youth from experiencing a much higher rate of homelessness than their non-foster counterparts when controlling for other adverse socioeconomic factors.[1]

Both foster home availability and homelessness are pressing and large-scale issues in the United States.[1,8] A significant number of children and adolescents are in foster care, and far too many become homeless after aging out of the system.[4] Youths who have been placed in foster care are at a higher risk of becoming homeless because they lack the support systems and skills needed for independent living.[7] A lack of financial

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resources further mediates this risk.[10] Homelessness exacerbates the challenges these young individuals face and puts them at risk for substance abuse, exploitation, and involvement with the criminal justice system.[5,10]

There are several notable issues regarding the current state of the foster care system in the United States. Many children and youth in foster care experience frequent placement changes, which disrupt their sense of stability and belonging.[11] Additionally, there are concerns about the overuse of congregate care facilities and the underfunding of family-based placements.[12] As a result, children in foster care may feel neglected and traumatized and lack attachment to their foster families.[13,14] The lack of positive attachment and untreated trauma are crucial factors in the disproportionately high rate of homelessness among former foster youth.[1]

While the negative impacts of this cycle of placement changes are evident in the increased likelihood of unemployment, involvement in criminal activities, and poor mental health, the underlying causes of these outcomes are less clear.[2] Many foster youths experience traumas prior to being placed in the foster care system. Moreover, subsequent trauma and stress can occur in foster care. In adulthood, former foster youth are less likely to have the same support systems as their non-foster counterparts. Understanding which factors directly impact long-term adverse outcomes like homelessness is crucial to guiding policymakers working on solutions.

The primary goal of this study was to examine the relationship between adverse experiences prior to foster care and homelessness in adulthood. This was achieved by surveying adults who had spent time in foster care and statistically analyzing the survey responses.

Literature Review

Over 550,000 children in the United States experience foster care each year.[4] Scholars have suggested three primary factors that explain adults' elevated rate of homelessness after foster care: issues experienced within the foster care system, lack of effective government intervention, and lack of community support.[2,14,15] Existing research rarely considers untreated trauma as a potential causal factor.[14] This review will offer an in-depth discussion of the findings regarding these issues and identify research gaps.

Newton *et al.* (2000) conducted a large meta-analysis to study the various pathways to homelessness in the general population.[14] The meta-analysis included 116 independent studies of various risk factors associated with homelessness. Cohort studies, case-control studies, and cross-sectional studies were included in the analysis. The study reported that exposure to the foster care system had the most significant association with homelessness across a variety of adverse childhood events and psychosocial factors. The study also found that low educational attainment, behavioral disorders, unemployment, and adverse life events in childhood were all independent risk factors for homelessness.[14] Combined, these findings indicate that the foster care system may not adequately address the psychological effects of trauma.

Several studies explored the phenomenon of children in the foster care system being frequently moved across foster care system being frequently moved across foster homes, group homes, and residential care settings and how this placement instability relates to risk factors of experiencing homelessness.[10,11,16] Placement instability may transpire because foster families find the responsibility too challenging or overwhelming. Empirical evidence has indicated that inadequately trained foster parents are correlated with higher instances of placement breakdowns and inadequate caregiving for vulnerable children.[17]

Other scholars have linked this placement instability in foster care to behavioral problems and poor academic performance.[2,11] The tumultuous living arrangements, coupled with the potential disruptions to their sense of stability and belonging, are catalysts for a range of behavior issues, spanning from emotional dysregulation and interpersonal conflicts to more profound manifestations of conduct disorders.[18]

Other research found that homelessness and other housing problems are associated with a higher risk of various adverse psychological outcomes among young people who have transitioned out of the foster care system.[14,15] Such evidence underscores the need for preemptive measures such as improved programs and targeted interventions for children and adolescents in foster care.[15]

One study demonstrated that a history of pre-existing mental health issues places children at a higher risk of maltreatment while in foster care.[19] Benedict[19] studied the risk factors for maltreatment in family foster settings, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. The study was conducted among a sample of children with and without reported history of maltreatment in foster care households. One child in each home was chosen at random, resulting in 78 children with a history of abuse in foster care and a group of 229 children with no history of abuse for a total study sample of 307 children. Of the children who had been maltreated, 48.7% were sexually abused. Two-thirds of the perpetrators in these cases were the father or another foster family member. In contrast, other foster children in the homes were perpetrators in 20% of the incidents.[19]

Another study highlighted the evidence that children in foster care may change schools ten or more times between elementary school and high school.[20] Pecora[20] reviewed case records and performed interviews of 1609 foster care alumni served by the Casey Family Program offices between 1966 and 1998 to understand the relationship between educational attainment and key factors, including placement stability and access to mental health services. The study demonstrated that placement instability negatively impacted both primary and secondary education outcomes.[20] Therefore, foster children encounter more frequent primary education challenges than their peers, including issues such as lost records, repeating grades, low test scores, and behavioral difficulties. These adversities further compound their already intricate educational trajectories.[21] In a parallel vein, school staff members are often unaware of students' status in foster care, and the educational implications of this further exacerbate the hurdles in academic settings that foster children face.

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Many scholars have attributed the adverse outcomes of foster care to a lack of targeted government intervention.[2,5,15] Fowler[5] examined the housing challenges experienced by adolescents as they transitioned out of foster care when they reached the age limit. The study investigated the interplay between housing and psychosocial outcomes by looking at a sample of 265 adolescents who left the foster care system in 2003 in a metropolitan region in the midwestern United States. This analysis spanned a follow-up period of two years. The results revealed four latent housing categories. Most participants enjoyed consistent housing stability after they departed from foster care. Those in the remaining three groups grappled with housing difficulties. During the tracking period, 20% of these adolescents were persistently homeless.[5] Correlations were established between housing instability and a range of adverse consequences, including emotional and behavioral complications, physical and sexual victimization, criminal convictions, and high school dropout rates. Fowler[5] concluded that underlying emotional and behavioral problems may be an important factor in housing instability. Despite the availability of funds that could be allocated to provide an array of services aimed at mitigating the risk of homelessness among adolescents, many states opt not to utilize these resources, forfeiting federal funding that could be channeled to preventive initiatives.[5]

One study found that services provided before youth begin to transition from foster care may improve long-term educational and employment outcomes.[2] Rosenberg[2] studied outcome data on 4,235 youth in the National Youth in Transitions Database (NYTD) to understand the relationship between episodic homelessness and post-secondary education and employment outcomes. The study found that homelessness experienced after aging out of foster care was correlated with lower post-secondary education and employment outcomes.[2] The study also found that among young adults who had aged out of foster care, those with a history of homelessness before aging out had higher rates of postsecondary education and full-time employment.[2] Rosenberg[2] speculated that this unexpected finding may be a result of increased access to mental health and other services available to homeless youth.

The deficiency in comprehensive evaluations of programs to address housing challenges and their subsequent detrimental ramifications limit the scope of available policies and interventions for this already vulnerable population. With over 130,000 adolescents currently in the foster care system and an additional 19,000 aging out of this system annually, financial constraints curtail the accessibility and thoroughness of housing support services.[4] Consequently, valuable opportunities to mitigate and forestall homelessness remain unrealized.

Some scholars have noted a lack of community support when someone who has been or is currently in foster care has lost their existing support network.[10,22] One research paper discussed the absence of mental health services and social support regarding readiness for higher education and achievements in higher education.[10] This study provided knowledge to be used by researchers, educators, and practitioners offering support to foster youth in community college settings. Despite the stated desire for postsecondary education by over 70% of youth in foster care, only 39% enrolled in two- or four-year institutions, and only 10% managed to secure an associate or bachelor's degree by the age of 25.[10]

Foster youth are likelier to drop out of college after their first year than peers from low-income and first-generation families.[22] This indicates that their struggles with postsecondary education are complex and go beyond financial constraints. The deficiency in preparation for independent living and oversight of contextual factors of homelessness significantly contribute to below-par educational outcomes for students with a history of foster care.[10]

Even though negative experiences in foster care, lack of government intervention, and lack of community support have been validated as influential in explaining the risk of homelessness for adolescents aging out of foster care, few scholars have focused on how an individual's history prior to being placed in the foster care system could mediate patterns of homelessness. This is a major gap in the current literature, as the experience before foster care is critical to shaping the trajectory of these children and influencing their subsequent mental health.

Many of these children have suffered from repeated abuse and prolonged neglect and often experience an insufficiently supportive and inconsistent living environment during their formative years. This negatively impacts their stability in adulthood. The current study explores how adverse experiences prior to involvement in the foster system correlate with major adverse life events in adulthood, including the risk of homelessness.

Theoretical Framework:

The concepts explored in this study are based on the theory that a combination of attachment issues and adverse childhood experiences may lead to neurodevelopmental deficits that leave foster children with an elevated risk of episodic or chronic homelessness.[9,13,23] The foster care system aims to provide temporary housing for children until permanent living arrangements can be found, thus preventing continued trauma and neglect. However, many children enter the foster care system with prior traumas that, if untreated, leave the child with a lifelong elevated risk of homelessness. Perry and Pollard examined the profound impact of early exposure to severe maltreatment on the physiological stress response in children.[23] Specifically, the study revealed that children with a history of abuse and neglect often exhibit a blunted cortisol response to stress. This, in turn, can adversely affect their emotional regulation and coping mechanisms when faced with challenging situations. Even if the child is removed from the situation and subsequent trauma is prevented, the psychological damage remains.

Spratt *et al*. explored the biological consequences of neglect on children's development.[9] Their work highlighted the impact of early neglect on structural and functional alterations in the brain, influencing cognitive, emotional, and social development. The authors emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing the impact of neglect on children with experience in foster care settings and shed light on the broader implications for children's well-being.

The physiological effects of trauma may not be sufficient to explain the difficulties that foster children face since the same degree of elevated risk factors is not observed in other populations exposed to trauma, such as the broader population of sexual abuse survivors.[1] The combined impact of attachment issues and untreated trauma can explain this. Dozier *et al.* investigated the attachment relationships of children in foster care and found that early experiences of abuse and neglect can significantly influence attachment patterns.[13] Their discussion centered on the link between insecure attachment and psychopathological symptoms among foster care children, emphasizing the critical need for interventions that support healthy attachment dynamics.

While the foster system focuses on ensuring a safe and secure environment, the mechanisms used may exacerbate the problematic attachment pathologies. Newton *et al.* found that frequent changes in foster care placement can exacerbate emotional and behavioral difficulties, highlighting the paramount importance of stability in the foster care system.[14]

If foster children's trauma and underlying attachment issues are addressed, they can develop the resilience necessary to transition to adulthood. Linares *et al.* investigated the enduring effects of abuse and neglect in adolescence on depression among young adults and revealed a significant association between early maltreatment and later depressive systems.[11] The study further demonstrated that when attachment issues were mitigated by placing siblings together in the same foster home, internalizing and externalizing behavioral issues were reduced. This study underscored the necessity for early intervention and support mechanisms tailored to the unique challenges faced by foster youth.

Drawing from these previous studies, it is clear that adverse experiences prior to entry into the foster care system can influence stress regulation, brain development, attachment patterns, and behavioral difficulties. Therefore, I hypothesize that adverse experiences such as abuse or parental incarceration prior to entering the foster care system affect stress regulation and attachment patterns, thereby increasing the likelihood of homelessness in adulthood.

Drawing on existing research, I define an adverse pre-foster care environment as consisting of both unhealthy attachment dynamics with a primary caregiver and neurodevelopmental problems related to traumatic experiences.[9,13,23] The types of adverse experiences prior to foster care examined were informed by typical adverse childhood experience (ACE) questions. Various combinations of pre-foster care household configurations were encoded to explore potential negative attachment dynamics prior to foster care. This combination of adverse childhood experiences causes a persistently elevated risk that must be addressed to prevent subsequent harm in adulthood. From this, I propose nine hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to abuse before entering the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 2: Exposure to parental incarceration before entering the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 3: Exposure to divorced or separated parents before the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 4: Exposure to household substance abuse before entering the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 5: Exposure to neglect before entering the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 6: Exposure to unmarried biological parents before the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 7: Exposure to single-parent households before the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 8: Exposure to non-parental rearing (never lived with the biological parent(s)) before the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Hypothesis 9: Early (0-4 years) vs. late (5+ years) first exposure to the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Method

Survey design:

This research employed a survey-based approach to investigate the relationship between adverse experiences prior to foster care and the likelihood of experiencing homelessness in adulthood. The survey was designed to gather qualitative and quantitative data from the participants through self-report measures. Quantitative variables were presented as binary options for each factor and the target variable. A free response section was included in the survey that asked each respondent to list any adverse experiences before entering foster care for the first time. The survey was designed on the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. MTurk provides a low-cost method for surveying large populations that might otherwise be difficult to reach.

Participants:

The participants in this study were recruited through MTurk, an online crowdsourcing platform that enables researchers to disseminate surveys to a broad population. With MTurk, requestors submit a survey and specify survey requirements, expected completion time, payment offered, and eligibility criteria. Surveys are then posted to the MTurk marketplace, and users who meet eligibility criteria can submit survey responses. Users are automatically paid the posted rate once the requestor verifies that a survey response meets quality standards. Participants were informed that the research was being conducted to understand factors that may contribute to the homelessness experienced after aging out of the foster care system.

Of 97 respondents, 57 completed the survey and indicated that they spent time in the U.S. foster care system. Forty individuals submitted responses but were excluded because they did not complete the survey. The inclusion criteria for participation were individuals with experience with foster care at some point, irrespective of age, gender, or other demographic characteristics. Participants who could not speak or read En

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glish were excluded, as the survey instruments were provided in English, and any language barrier could hinder effective communication and data collection. The option to participate in a 30- to 40-minute interview for a $5 compensation fee was given to those who provided their email addresses. Only one respondent opted to be interviewed directly but failed to participate upon follow-up.

Procedure:

Recruitment. Participants were recruited from the MTurk platform and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Each participant was compensated with thirty cents for participating in the initial survey.

Informed Consent. Before participating in the study, participants were given a brief description of the study's purpose and goals. Their participation in the survey was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were allowed to provide their email addresses if they were interested in participating in a more extensive 30–40-minute interview in exchange for a $5 compensation fee.

Survey Administration. Participants were directed to an online survey hosted on a secure platform. The survey consisted of questions coded with yes or no response options and designed to assess various factors, including adverse experiences prior to foster care, experiences in foster care, and experiences in adulthood, including homelessness.

Data Collection. Participants were asked to provide information about their experiences before and during foster care. Specifically, they were asked to report any adverse experiences that occurred before entering the foster care system as yes or no responses to specific questions describing each adverse childhood experience. Additionally, participants were asked to indicate whether they had experienced homelessness in adulthood.

Data Analysis. Quantitative data collected from the survey were analyzed by applying a Fisher's exact test to cross-tabulations of the data to assess the relationship between adverse experiences prior to foster care and the likelihood of homelessness into adulthood. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis to fill in missing quantitative responses. All data analysis was performed in a Jupyter Notebook using Pandas and Scipy libraries.

Confidentiality. This research study obtained informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for participants. No personally identifiable information was collected during the survey.

Results and Discussion

The prevalence of homelessness in the survey population is described as a positive homelessness rate and was higher for several factors studied (Figure 1 Survey Summary Results). A Fisher exact test was performed to estimate the odds ratio and p-value against the null hypothesis that a particular feature is unrelated to the prevalence of homelessness in the sample population.

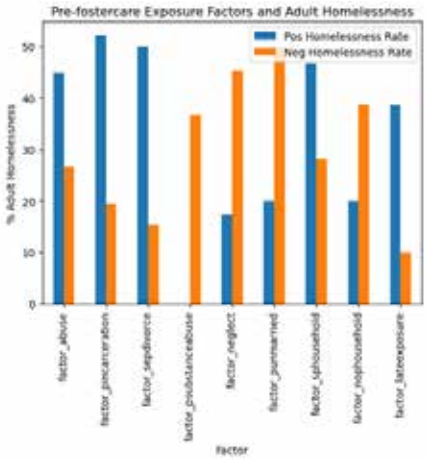

Figure 1: Survey summary results.

The rate of homelessness was calculated for all participants across each factor (Table 2 Survey detail results). Among the group who had experienced abuse, in which 18 individuals experienced prior abuse, 45% of them later became homeless. In contrast, among the non-abused group of 34 individuals, only 26.5% became homeless. This outcome supports Hypothesis 1, indicating that prior exposure to abuse before entering the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness, with the abused group having a greater likelihood of becoming homeless. Furthermore, the study found that of 23 individuals in the group of participants who had parents incarcerated prior to entering the foster care system, 52.2% later became homeless.

In contrast, of the 31 individuals without a history of parental incarceration, only 19.2% became homeless. This result supports Hypothesis 2, indicating that prior exposure to parental incarceration contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness. In the study, the group with divorced or separated parents, consisting of 28 individuals who experienced such family situations prior to foster care, had a homelessness rate of 50%. In contrast, the group without divorced parents, comprising 26 individuals with intact family backgrounds, had a lower rate of 15.4% homelessness. This outcome supports Hypothesis 3, suggesting that prior exposure to divorced or separated parents contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

Table 1: Survey summary results.

	Factor	Positive Count	Negative Count	Pos Homeless Count	Neg Homeless Count	Pos Homelessness Rate	Neg Homelessness Rate
0	factor_abuse	20	34	9	9	45.0	26.5
1	factor_parincarceration	23	31	12	6	52.2	19.4
2	factor_sepdivorce	28	26	14	4	50.0	15.4
3	factor_psubstanceabuse	5	49	0	18	0.0	36.7
4	factor_neglect	23	31	4	14	17.4	45.2
5	factor_punmarried	30	24	6	12	20.0	50.0
6	factor_sphousehold	18	38	7	11	38.9	28.9
7	factor_nophousehold	10	39	3	15	30.0	38.5
8	factor_earlyexposure	18	44	1	17	5.6	38.6
9	factor_latexposure	44	18	17	1	38.6	5.6

The group with a history of substance abuse in the household, consisting of 5 individuals who experienced such family situations before foster care, had a homelessness rate of 0%. In contrast, the group without a history of household substance abuse, comprising 49 individuals, had a higher rate of 36.7%

homelessness. This outcome does not support Hypothesis 4, suggesting that prior exposure to substance abuse in the household does not contribute to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

The group that experienced neglect, consisting of 23 individuals who experienced such family situations before foster care, had a homelessness rate of 17.4%. In contrast, the group without experiencing neglect, comprising 31 individuals, had a higher rate of 45.2% homelessness. This outcome does not support Hypothesis 5, suggesting that prior exposure to neglect does not contribute to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness.

The group with unmarried parents, consisting of 30 individuals whose parents were unmarried before foster care, had a homelessness rate of 20%. In contrast, the group with married parents, comprising 24 individuals with married parents, had a higher rate of 50% homelessness. This outcome does not support Hypothesis 6, suggesting that having unmarried parents does not contribute to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness. However, only 1 of the 24 participants with married parents had both parents residing in the same household (not separated).

The group with single-parent households, consisting of 15 individuals who experienced such family situations before foster care, had a homelessness rate of 46.7%. In contrast, the group residing with two parental figures, comprising 39 individuals, had a lower rate of 28.2% homelessness. This outcome supports Hypothesis 7, suggesting that living with a single caregiver contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness after leaving foster care.

The group who resided with a caregiver who was not a parent, consisting of 15 individuals who experienced such family situations before foster care, had a homelessness rate of 20%. In contrast, the group that resided with one or both parents before foster care, comprising 39 individuals, had a higher rate of 38.5%. This outcome does not support Hypothesis 8, suggesting that residing with a non-parental caregiver does not contribute to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness after leaving foster care.

The group that entered foster care before five years of age, consisting of 10 individuals, had a homelessness rate of 10%, while the group that entered foster care after four years of age, comprising 44 individuals, had a higher rate of 38.6% homelessness. This outcome supports Hypothesis 9, suggesting that later entry into the foster care system contributes to a higher probability of experiencing homelessness after leaving foster care.

While several factors predicted a higher likelihood of homelessness, these differences did not reach statistical significance in all cases (Table 3 Effect size results). Participants who lived in a household where at least one parent was incarcerated had a significantly higher chance of experiencing adult homelessness than those who did not have an incarcerated parent (odds ratio of 4.6x, p-value: .02). Participants whose parents were separated or divorced had a significantly higher chance of experiencing homelessness as adults than those whose parents were not separated or divorced (odds ratio of 5.5x, p-value: .01).

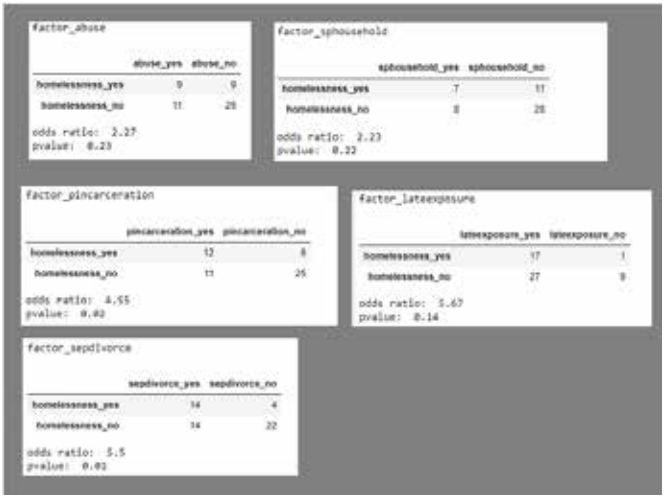

Figure 2: Effect size results (Fisher exact).

Discussion

This study found that the adverse childhood experiences of parental incarceration and abuse prior to foster care were both associated with homelessness in adulthood. This finding is consistent with the study hypothesis and previously discussed research. It was surprising that experiences of neglect prior to foster care were not associated with homelessness in adulthood, but this could be because feelings of neglect persisted throughout the foster care experience because of the frequency of placement changes.

The study also found that living in a single-parent household and experiencing a parental divorce prior to foster care were both associated with homelessness in adulthood. These factors may contribute to attachment issues that get compounded as children are placed in the foster care system. The finding that children exposed to the foster care system later in childhood are less likely to experience homelessness may indicate that these underlying attachment issues are mitigated with a more stable pre-foster care household or that placement changes in foster care are less impactful on their development.

One limitation of this study is the small sample size, which makes generalizing the results problematic. With a small sample size, the survey population may not represent the entire adult population with experience in foster care. Additionally, there is a potential for bias in the results due to the self-selection of survey participants. Since the survey was delivered electronically, participants needed to be adequately screened for candor. No respondents participated in follow-up interviews. Therefore, candor screening was not possible. Moreover, using MTurk to incentivize participation increases the chance of self-selection bias because participants were paid for their participation.

The survey instrument used for this study did not collect demographic information beyond the inclusion criteria, which was that participants spent time in foster care in the United States. This limitation could reduce the generalizability of the

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study findings because housing policy and foster care policies vary by state. Further research should study the impact of these differences on the prevalence of and causal factors for homelessness in this population.

The survey also did not differentiate between different patterns of homelessness or different types of foster care experience. Episodic homelessness and chronic homelessness were both coded as homelessness in the target variable. Additionally, the survey did not include information about how old each respondent was when they left foster care or how long they had been out of foster care.

Finally, this study did not consider how pre-foster care experience increases the likelihood of homelessness, which will be important in formulating policy proposals. For example, foster children with pre-existing trauma may be at higher risk of persistent drug abuse and addiction, which can lead to homelessness. This could be important in formulating interventions to break the cycle.

While specific pre-existing traumas were shown to be correlated with adult homelessness versus the foster care experience alone, more complex interactions between pre-existing traumas should be studied to understand the significance of a particular trauma on long-term outcomes. For example, future research could examine whether specific traumas tend to co-exist and, if so, how multiple traumas affect adverse outcomes in adulthood as compared to one particular trauma.

Moreover, more research is needed to understand if specific pre-existing traumas interact with traumas, even if minor, which are experienced in the foster care system. For example, it may be examined whether placement of a child with pre-existing emotional abuse in a large foster family in which the child does not receive sufficient emotional support contributes to adult homelessness. Such research could inform placement decisions for social services organizations.

Further research should employ a more rigorous survey methodology that increases the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Increasing the sample size would increase confidence in the reliability of the effect size estimates by increasing the studies' statistical power. Including participants from other countries would also improve the generalizability of the results.

Conclusion

This study predicted that participants with pre-existing trauma would be more likely to experience adult homelessness than those without such trauma. The findings demonstrated that pre-existing traumas may be a better predictor of homelessness than the experience of foster care itself. The study showed that pre-existing abuse, parental incarceration, and parental separation or divorce were found to contribute more to adult homelessness than the experience of foster care itself.

Systemic challenges like housing availability and rent costs place an added burden on youth aging out of foster care without the types of family and community support available to their counterparts. Untreated trauma experienced before an introduction to the foster care system may act as a secondary burden that many fail to overcome.

By understanding the importance of pre-existing trauma as a predictor of adult homelessness, policymakers can formulate mental health interventions that address the underlying trauma while under the care of social services. While job training and transition assistance are aimed at preparing foster children for independent living, they may have little impact on those with underlying untreated trauma. Trauma-focused interventions, like art therapy, have improved long-term outcomes for children. Investing more in these types of programs could yield a significant benefit to society when compared with the long-term cost of chronic homelessness and drug abuse.

Homelessness is a persistent and growing problem. To reduce the risk of homelessness, policymakers and researchers must understand the relative contribution of trauma experienced as a result of the foster experience versus trauma experienced before exposure to the foster care system. Identifying targeted interventions aimed at breaking the cycle of homelessness experienced by many with a history of living in the foster care system is essential for improving the life prospects of disadvantaged youth and alleviating the stressors on social services and the criminal justice system. Reforms are needed to enhance the quality of foster care, provide comprehensive support for youth with experience in the foster care system, and mitigate the risks of homelessness and incarceration that currently loom over their futures.

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