



# The gender gap in educational expectations among youth in the foster care system

Chris Michael Kirk<sup>\*</sup>, Rhonda K. Lewis, Kyrah Brown, Corinne Nilsen, Deltha Q. Colvin

Department of Psychology, Wichita State University, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Youth in the foster care system are at greater risk for a host of aversive outcomes including diminished educational performance and attainment. While these issues are well-documented, less is known about gender differences on academic outcomes for these students. Over the past three decades, women have overtaken men in college attendance and post-secondary degree attainment. Research suggests that this gender gap may be greater among marginalized groups, including youth emerging from the foster care system. Using data from a statewide sample of adolescents in foster care, the current study explores the effect of gender on educational expectations and measures gender differences in college efficacy, academic functioning, and preparation for post-secondary education. After controlling for race/ethnicity and grade level, logistic regression models showed the females in foster care reported more than twice the likelihood of achieving a Bachelor's or graduate degree. Comparisons between genders revealed that females had higher reported academic performance than males, with males making greater gains in educational expectations after participating in a college access program. Limitations and suggestions for future research and action are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, a stunning crossover has occurred in college attainment between the genders. While male college enrollment has increased by 55% since 1970, female enrollment has increased by 195%, more than three and a half times the male rate of increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In 2008, females comprised 57% of the college population and out-gained males receiving Bachelor's degrees by eight percentage points, a gap that continues to widen (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). These trends are not isolated within the United States, but have also been observed in other developed nations (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006).

Several explanations have been given for the cross-over that has created a gap between gender groups in educational enrollment and attainment. For example, the changing societal norms and expectations of women may be partially responsible for the increase in educational pursuit by females (Goldin et al., 2006). Another prominent argument considers the premium, or expected returns, for those who obtain a college degree, suggesting that females may stand to gain more than males from their investment in college education (Becker, Hubbard, & Murphy, 2010; Christofides, Hoy, & Yang, 2008; Frenette & Zeman, 2007), which in turn may affect their expectations as adolescents (Haveman, Wilson, & Wolfe, 2005).

Not only are gender gaps growing in educational attainment as a whole, these gaps are more extreme in low-income and minority

populations (Jacob, 2002). For example, the gap between female and male Bachelor degree recipients in the United States is 32 percentage points for Blacks, 22 for Hispanics and 14 for Whites (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Ginder, & Miller, 2007). This growing disparity has been lauded as a "crisis" by many concerned about the welfare of young men, particularly young men of color (Sadowski, 2010; Whitmire, 2010).

One of the populations at greatest risk for educational underachievement is youth who have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care. Each year up to 25,000 U.S. youth are "aged out" of the foster care system upon reaching adulthood (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2008). These young adults often find themselves extremely vulnerable to mental health needs, homelessness, unemployment, and other maladies (Nixon & Jones, 2007). Estimates show that only as many as 10% of former foster youth enroll in college (Wolanin, 2005) with as little as four percent obtaining a Bachelor's degree (Nixon & Jones, 2007). The resilient minority of former foster youth who enter college is more likely to drop out before completing one year or before completing a degree than are other low-income, first-generation students (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011).

Not surprisingly, the gender gaps found in other populations appear to be present within former foster care youth as well. One recent longitudinal study found a gender gap in young adults who had been in foster care as adolescents with 29.5% of females having attended at least one year of college, compared to only 21.1% of males (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). While these numbers are cause for concern, less is known about the precursors connected to these disparities in educational attainment. The current study

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260, United States.

E-mail address: [cxkirk@wichita.edu](mailto:cxkirk@wichita.edu) (C.M. Kirk).

adds to the literature on educational attainment among youth in foster care by exploring emerging gender gaps in a statewide sample of adolescents from the foster care system. Specifically, three sets of factors are considered: 1) educational expectations, 2) perceptions of academic performance, and 3) preparation for college. Implications for college access programs are included.

### 1.1. Educational expectations and college efficacy

Educational expectations are assessments of how much education a student believes they will be able to attain (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). They serve as a link between idealized goals (or aspirations) and future attainment (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; Trusty, 2000). Educational expectations are academic-focused possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) which have been shown to lead to better grades and more persistence in the classroom (Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger, 1999; Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007). These expected, future selves are highly susceptible to external cues, including perceptions of personal ability and the affordability of attending college (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Faced with many challenges, youth in foster care as a whole report lower educational aspirations and efficacy for college attendance than other economically-disadvantaged students (Kirk, Lewis et al., 2011).

As may be expected given college enrollment statistics, females, on average, report higher educational expectations than males do (Marjoribanks, 2002; Yowell, 2000), with more pronounced differences among Black youth (Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). These discrepancies in educational expectations may start early. One study of elementary school children revealed that, while girls and boys reported similar aspirations for college attendance, female students were much more likely to aspire to careers that would require post-secondary education (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008). Similarly, a study with adolescents found that almost one in four (23%) boys reported that they didn't need to attend college to get the job of their choice compared to only 16% of girls (Jacob, 2002).

### 1.2. Academic performance

Gender gaps in academic performance have also been widely documented. For at least 20 years, females have outscored males on reading assessment scores, with males slightly leading in mathematics scores. This effect has been documented across countries and is linked to gender-equality (Guiso, Monte, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2008). Over the past three decades, female test scores in the U.S. have increased at a more rapid rate than males (Cho, 2007), although some evidence suggests that the reading gap between the genders may be closing (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009). Another study found that nearly 60% of the variance in the gender gap for post-secondary educational attainment could be accounted for by earlier academic performance including grades, reading test scores, study habits, and having to repeat a grade (Frenette & Zeman, 2007).

Youth in foster care are at greater risk for diminished attainment in the future due to frequent school disruptions and other adjustment difficulties. Males in foster care may experience this to a greater degree. One study found that females emerging from residential foster care had higher grade point averages and less school referrals than their male peers did (Griffith et al., 2009). The ability to maintain school performance may be especially important for youth in the foster care system. One study in Sweden found that school performance at ages 15 and 16 was a significant risk factor for subsequent psychosocial problems including suicide, substance use, and criminal behavior in young adulthood (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011).

Beyond test scores, the way students perceive their abilities affects their expectations for the future and behavior in the present. Academic self-perception is a measure of how a student perceives

herself in relation to the school domain. It is a broad term which encompasses the constructs of academic self-concept and academic self-efficacy and has been linked to academic achievement (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Garg, Melanson, & Levin, 2007) and educational expectations (Kirk, Lewis et al., 2011). Several studies have suggested that males are more likely to dislike school (Jacob, 2002; Kleinfeld, 2009). Youth in foster care report lower academic self-perception than other students (Kirk, Lewis et al., 2011). If males in foster care consider themselves to be poorer students than females, this may decrease their motivation and persistence in the present and their expectations for educational attainment in the future.

### 1.3. College preparation

Finally, the role of college preparation should be considered. This includes the completion of rigorous coursework that prepares students for college and familiarity with the mechanisms for both enrolling and funding a college education. Research shows that females take more rigorous courses than males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) with an increasing percentage of females enrolling in math and science courses (Cho, 2007). Awareness of college entrance requirements and financial aid have been demonstrated to be important for low-income, minority groups (Kim, Desjardins, & McCall, 2009) although differences between males and females in this domain have not been clearly explored.

Parents clearly play a key role in forwarding knowledge and expectations about college to their children (Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Youth in foster care, of course, often experience disruptions to this parental relationship and may have to rely on information about college from other sources. However, the presence of other adult mentors may adjust for this loss and promote educational expectations (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008). Thus, college access programs which target youth in foster care may be extremely important in adjusting for this lack of parental knowledge and support.

### 1.4. Setting and research questions

Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP (KKGU) is a federally-funded college access program which provides college preparation and scholarship assistance to youth in foster care and other economically-disadvantaged youth from across the state of Kansas. Program participants are connected with regional staff. They complete workshops about college and financial aid, go on college visits, and participate in job shadowing. In 2010, Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP served over 2000 youth statewide, of which 550 were in the foster care system.

The current study uses baseline and follow-up data from the foster care participants of KKGU to examine gender gaps in educational expectations, college efficacy, academic performance, and college preparation. First, the effect of gender on expectations for Bachelor's degree and graduate degree attainment was explored. Then, differences between females and males were explored on baseline measures of 1) efficacy for college attendance, 2) perceptions of academic performance (including academic self-perception and self-reported grades), and 3) college preparation (i.e. knowledge of the high school courses needed, awareness of college entrance requirements, and familiarity with financial aid sources). Finally, follow-up data on educational expectations was examined to consider gender differences in educational expectation change after participation in KKGU.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

In 2010–2011, a total of 550 youth from the foster care system were enrolled in the Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP (KKGU) program. Fifty-four percent of the participants were female ( $N = 297, 54\%$ ).

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