



# The relationship between extracurricular activities and delinquency of adolescents in foster care<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships between involvement in extracurricular activities and delinquency for adolescents in foster care. Using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a subsample of adolescents ( $n = 117$ ) in long-term foster care was the focus of this study. Contrary to the hypotheses, results indicated that greater involvement in extracurricular activities was associated with higher levels of delinquency. Further analyses revealed that the type of placement and closeness with caregiver predicted delinquency above and beyond the frequency of participation in extracurricular activities. Implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

When maltreatment is so severe that it is no longer safe for a child to remain in the custody of their parents, the child may be placed within the foster care system (Kools, 1997). Often children are removed not only from their biological parents, but from their friends, schools, and communities. These separations may create a sense of loss, and children may react to these losses in maladaptive ways (Grogan-Kaylor, Ruffolo, Ortega, & Clarke, 2007; Haskett, Nears, Ward, & McPherson, 2006). The pervasiveness of behavioral problems among children in foster care has long been documented (Heflinger, Simpkins, & Combs-Orme, 2000; Zima, Bussing, Yang, & Belin, 2000). Determining ways to decrease problematic behavior of adolescents in foster care may help protect them from the serious longer-term consequences of delinquency, such as criminal activity as adults (Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). Studies have shown that enhancing a sense of community through involvement in extracurricular activities may be one means of helping to decrease problematic

behavior (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Linville & Hurbner, 2005; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Ryan, Marshall, Herz, & Hernandez, 2008; Sandford, Duncombe, & Armour, 2008). However, research examining this relationship specifically for adolescents in foster care has been limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between involvement in extracurricular activities and delinquency for adolescents in long-term foster care.

There is substantial evidence that children who are victims of abuse and neglect are at high risk for emotional and behavioral problems (Jonson-Reid, 1998; Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, & Marshall, 2007). Children who reside in foster care are at a greater risk for various negative outcomes than their peers who are not in foster care (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2007). Adolescents in foster care have been shown to have a greater susceptibility for behavior problems (Ryan, Marshall, et al., 2008) and behavior problems may lead to delinquency (Lemmon, 2006; Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008; Widom, 2003).

Ryan, Hernandez, et al. (2007) reported that 45% of the adolescents in foster care in their sample were arrested at least one time during the study period. Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000) found that middle school aged children entering the teenage years were more likely to be youth offenders following entry into foster care. Similarly, Heflinger et al. (2000) reported that the highest total problem scores were found for children aged 13–15. Further, Rosenthal and Curiel (2006) found that youths' self-report of problem behaviors were even higher than caregivers' reports. Given the increased risk for delinquency specifically for youths within these age ranges, the focus of the present study was mid-to-late adolescents in long-term foster care, and incorporated both youths' and caregivers' reports of delinquency.

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### 1.1. Theoretical background

Social control theory is frequently used to explain adolescent delinquency (Li, 2004). Social control theorists suggest that the greater an individual's social capital, the greater their sense of social commitment (Hirschi, 1969). Families are socializing agents responsible for instilling a sense of attachment, commitment, and obligation. People deviate from normative behavior when their social bonds are weak or broken (Hirschi, 1969). Certainly, children in foster care have weakened social bonds.

Child maltreatment uniquely impacts a child's social resources (Ryan & Testa, 2005). When abuse or neglect occurs, it may undermine a child's sense of commitment, trust, and obligation resulting in increases in problematic behavior (Cernkovich, Lanctot, & Giordano, 2008; Ryan & Testa, 2005). A recent study designed to identify risk factors associated with female adolescent delinquency found that lower levels of family trust and caring were predictive of higher rates of delinquency (Cernkovich et al., 2008). Further, ineffective parenting has been found to predict adolescent delinquency (Simons, Chao, Conger, & Elder, 2001).

Applying social control theory to foster care, the removal of children from their homes may break what social bonds they do have, further diminishing their sense of social control. As a result, increases in problematic behavior may be expected. However, with time, protective factors may lead to decreases in problem behavior (Leon, Ragsdale, Miller, & Spacarelli, 2008). If youths are involved in contexts that promote their sense of commitment, trust, and obligation, one may expect problem behaviors to diminish as youths rebuild their social capital. Ryan, Testa, and Zhai (2008) highlight the role that social bonds plays with delinquency of at-risk youths. Involvement in extracurricular activities may provide opportunities for social bonds with both adult figures and peers.

### 1.2. Potential effects of youth involvement in activities

For decades, communities have attempted to address the needs of at-risk youths by developing and offering specific youth activities (De Wit et al., 2007). Participating in extracurricular activities has been associated with decreased antisocial behavior, specifically aggression, among youths (Mahoney, 2000). For adolescents in foster care, who are already more susceptible to engaging in problematic behavior, being involved in structured extracurricular activities may be a significant protective factor against risky behaviors.

Family disruption has been theoretically linked with a sense of social disorganization which has been associated with behavior problems in adolescents (Tiet, Huizinga, & Byrnes, 2010). Relying on social disorganization theory, Tiet et al. (2010) hypothesized that youths' report of involvement in extracurricular activities would be associated with lower levels of anti-social behavior among adolescents living in high-risk neighborhoods. Results provided tentative support for the positive relationship between involvement in activities and resilience. Other researchers have also demonstrated that youths who drop out of activities have greater delinquency scores compared to those who stayed in structured extra-curricular activities (Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007). Similarly, Haskett et al. (2006) demonstrated that experiences within the broader community may moderate the relationship between out-of home placement and delinquency.

Different types of activities, however, may yield different outcomes (Persson et al., 2007). Activities that are structured and have positive role models are associated with positive adolescent outcomes (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Sandford et al., 2008). Extracurricular activities that have regularly scheduled practices or meetings may provide a sense of structure to children's lives. For adolescents in foster care, this may be beneficial as sometimes these children may endure substantial, continual changes. Often times, children in foster care are confronted with changes with friends, case workers, and even

foster parents. Participating in an extracurricular activity may provide a sense of structure that may help reestablish some sense of stability to these young people's lives.

Yet not all studies demonstrate positive relationship between involvement in activities and outcomes. For example, in a randomized controlled trial, De Wit et al. (2007) conducted a national level evaluation of a specific community program, namely Big Brother Big Sisters, aimed to improve child behavior among at-risk youths. Results did not indicate significant differences between many outcomes, including behavior problems, when comparing experimental and control groups. The authors suggested, however, that the lack of significance may be related to other factors, such as a lack of statistical power. Similarly, Mahoney and Stattin (2000) showed a link between unstructured activities and an increase in antisocial behavior and delinquency. Although researchers have begun to focus on the relationship between involvement in extracurricular activities and problematic behaviors, no known study has examined this specifically for adolescents in foster care.

### 1.3. Type of placement, closeness with caregivers, and outcomes

Although the general term *foster care* is frequently used to describe the living situations of all children involved with the child welfare system, not every placement is the same. Approximately half of the children in foster care are placed with relatives in situations often labeled "kinship care" or "relative placement" (Dubowitz et al., 1994). Yet, in other instances, usually when kinship care is not possible, children are placed in traditional foster care settings where they reside with non-relatives.

Placement type is sometimes a controversial issue in the child welfare literature. There are some who endorse kinship care as the preferred placement type, because it may eliminate the trauma associated with placing children with strangers (Dubowitz et al., 1994), and it may help maintain family connections (Holtan, Ronning, Handegayrd, & Sourander, 2005; Rushton & Minnis, 2002). However, others voice concerns about placing children in the same family that raised parents who were unable to care for their children (Dubowitz et al., 1994). Additionally, kinship placements are perceived as more difficult to supervise, more likely to delay reunification, and more likely to permit unsupervised contact between biological parents and children when compared to non-relative foster care placements (Dubowitz et al., 1994).

Youths placed in group home settings are at a higher risk of aggression and delinquency than youths who are placed in traditional foster family settings; the relative risk of delinquency is at least double for adolescents who have experienced at least one group home placement compared to youths in traditional foster care placements (Ryan, Marshall, et al., 2008). Some espouse that the increased risk for delinquency for youths in group homes specifically may be due to the "negative effects of peer contagion" (Ryan, Marshall, et al., 2008, p. 1089), where the opportunities for adolescents to seek peers with similar attitudes toward delinquency may be greater in group homes.

In a review of research on placement outcomes for children in treatment foster care, Redding, Fried, and Britner (2000) suggested that poor relationships with current caregivers have negative effects on children in foster care. Similarly, findings from a study conducted by Moretti, Holland, Moore, and McKay (2004) indicated that an intervention aimed to improve caregiver-adolescent relationships resulted in a diminishment of delinquency of adolescents at post-test.

Although little is known about the effect of involvement with extracurricular activities and delinquency specifically for adolescents in foster care, it has been shown that involvement in activities may afford opportunities to build positive relationships, which in turn, may result in better outcomes for the youths participating in these activities (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Sandford et al., 2008). For youths

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