



The importance of friends among foster youth aging out of care: Cluster profiles of deviant peer affiliations [☆]

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ABSTRACT

The importance of friends during the developmental periods of childhood and adolescence is widely accepted and there is reason to believe that deviant peers play an important role in influencing the experiences and outcomes of young people aging out of foster care. This article uses Latent Class Analysis to explore the role that deviant peers play in the lives of these young people by empirically examining the heterogeneity of deviant peer affiliations in a sample of youth aging out of care. A three class solution exhibited the best fit and the classes consisted of youth with low, medium, and high levels of deviant peer affiliations. Using a range of covariates to validate the classes, we found that youth exhibiting high levels of deviant peer affiliations were more likely to be fired from a job, to possess a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, to report higher levels of substance use, and to report being arrested than youth in the other two classes. Youth in the low deviant peer affiliation class exhibited higher levels of family support and lower levels of neighborhood disorder than youth in the other two classes. The research, policy, and practice implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The importance of friends during the developmental periods of childhood and adolescence is widely accepted as research has consistently found that children and adolescents can be easily influenced (Maxwell, 2002), especially by those in their peer groups (Steinberg and Scott, 2003). The specific influence of friends on developmental trajectories is not invariant, however, but is dependent on the nature of those contacts. Numerous studies have found that children and youth with friends do better across a range of dimensions than those without friends (e.g., Güroğlu, van Lieshout, Haselager, & Scholte, 2007). At the same time, a rich research base has also found that associations with deviant peers are related to a greater likelihood of delinquency and other negative behaviors such as substance use (e.g., Dishion, Andrews, Kavanagh, & Soberman, 1996a). Consequently, it is important that research on children and youth examines the effects that peer relationships have on different types of youth.

Despite this robust literature, the effect of friends on foster youth aging out of care has yet to be systematically studied. This omission is particularly significant because there is reason to believe that deviant

peer affiliations may play an important role in the outcomes of youth transitioning from care and to adulthood. Youth transitioning from care have had disruptions in their relationships and connections with their families and other sources of support (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). They often have had contact with the justice systems, live in socially disorganized neighborhoods that have higher rates of crime, experience substance abuse or mental health problems, leave the child welfare system with educational deficiencies, and are either unemployed or experience employment instability (Courtney, Dworsky, Ruth, Keller, Havlicek & Bost, 2005; Vaughn, Shook, & McMillen, 2008). Further, many youth who transition out of the child welfare system have spent time in group and residential facilities, where they are in consistent contact with other youth (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). Thus, the range of affiliations youth encounter as they transition out of care may involve peer contacts that are deviant or antisocial in nature, and, therefore, are likely to play an important role in relation to their experiences and outcomes upon leaving the system.

Given this likelihood, there is a need for research that explores the deviant peer affiliations of transition age youth and the relationship between these associations and factors such as involvement in the legal system, substance use, family and social support, neighborhood disorder, mental health, employment/education, and involvement in the child welfare system. This inquiry is of particular importance to transition age youth because of the many obstacles they face in transitioning to adulthood. Thus, this article explores the deviant peer

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affiliations of transition age youth by empirically examining the heterogeneity of deviant peer affiliations in a sample of foster youth aging out of care in Missouri ($n=404$). Specifically, we employ finite mixture modeling to form latent cluster profiles of foster youth based on nine indicators of deviant peer affiliations. These clusters are validated using a range of covariates measuring both individual level and social processes factors. Although we did not hypothesize a specific number of latent clusters (e.g., three, four, or five), we expect that youth who have friends engaged in a relatively high intensity of deviant acts will be at increased risk for unsuccessful adolescent-to-adulthood transitions based on a range of variables such as legal involvement and drug abuse. Based on this analysis, we provide an in-depth discussion of the clusters and discuss the influence of deviant peer associations in the lives of these youth.

2. Influence of friends on child and adolescent behavior

Generally, friendships are thought to positively shape the social, emotional and cognitive development of children and adolescents though the exact impact on developmental significance has yet to be clarified (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Hartup, 1996). On average, youth without friends are more likely to be rejected by their peers than youth with friends (Güroğlu et al., 2007). Children and youth with friends have been shown to be more self-confident, cooperative (Clark & Drewry, 1985), altruistic, score higher in emotional perspective taking (McQuire & Weisz, 1982; Güroğlu et al., 2007) and better at problem solving (Azmitia & Montgomery, 1993) than those without friends. Further, Güroğlu et al. (2007) found in their research of youth dyads that generally preadolescents without friends were more depressed than those with friends and that adolescents without friends engaged in more delinquency and consumed more alcohol, cigarettes and drugs than adolescents with friends. Other longitudinal research has also shown that a single friend can affect how well a child performs in school (Mounts and Steinberg, 1995) or if he or she will begin smoking cigarettes (Urberg, 1992) or drinking alcohol (Urberg, Degirmencioglu, and Pilgrim, 1997).

While the positive influence of friends on behavior and development is well established, numerous studies have also shown that some friends can negatively influence a child or an adolescent's behavior (Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994; Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000; Lacourse, Nagin, Tremblay, Vitaro, & Claes, 2003). In particular, there is a growing agreement among peer influence researchers that involvement with delinquent peer groups contributes to antisocial behavior (Dishion et al., 1994; Patterson et al., 2000; Lacourse et al., 2003) and criminal acts including aggravated assault or homicide (Howell, 1999). Other studies have reported correlations between how an adolescent perceives their friends' activities and their own cigarette smoking (Eiser and Stroebe, 1972; Hirschman, Leventhal, & Glynn, 1984; Evans, Dratt, Raines, & Rosenburg, 1988) illegal drug use (Huba & Bentler, 1980), alcohol consumption (Thorlindsson & Vihjalmsson, 1991) and sexual behavior (Benda & Diblasio, 1994; Reinecke, Schmidt, & Ajzen, 1997). These findings have been corroborated by randomized controlled studies that have shown a reduction in delinquent behavior, substance abuse and police arrests when delinquent peers spend less time together (Chamberlain & Reid, 1998; Vitaro, Brengden, & Tremblay, 2001).

Longitudinal studies of peer relationships have demonstrated how perceived subjective norms predicted the intention to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol (Maxwell, 2002), although the effects of these norms are most likely inflated due to projection, a psychological defense mechanism (Bauman and Ennett, 1994). Studies have also shown that youth smokers were more likely to list others smokers as friends (Hill, 1971; Eiser & Van Der Plicht, 1984) and boys who smoked and drank were more likely to have friends with similar behaviors compared to boys who dipped snuff and chewed tobacco (Hunter, Vizeberg, & Berenson, 1991). One recent longitudinal study by

Maxwell (2002) of 1969 adolescents aged 12–18 showed that adolescents who had a friend engage in risky behavior at time one had on average a 12% greater risk of engaging in risky behavior at time two, leading to the conclusion that friends have a strong effect on adolescent risk behavior.

Given the strong relationship between deviant peer associations and delinquent behavior, scholars have sought to specify the pathways through which these associations influence behavior. In fact, many classical criminological theories focus on the role that interactions with intimates play in learning and reinforcement (e.g., Sutherland & Cressey, 1970; Akers, 2000). Although a thorough review of the causal processes through which peers influence behavior is beyond the scope of this paper, it is generally argued that deviant friends positively influence or reinforce their friends' deviant behavior, and this tends to increase the propensity towards future deviant behavior (Dishion, Andrews, Kavanagh, & Soberman, 1996). Patterson et al. (2000) have termed this positive reinforcement "delinquency training" and studies have been able to demonstrate the effect of delinquency training on behavior (Dishion, Andrews, Kavanagh, & Soberman, 1996; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews & Patterson, 1996). Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, and Li (1995) have also shown that delinquency training has been able to predict increases in the use of tobacco, marijuana and alcohol use. Other scholars referred to this relationship as the facilitation effect (Lacourse et al., 2003), where youth reinforce delinquent behavior by their approval of that behavior, thereby increasing its prevalence (Dishion, Andrews, Kavanagh, & Soberman, 1996; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews & Patterson, 1996; Patterson et al., 2000; Lacourse et al., 2003).

In another study regarding the influence of deviant peers on eventual delinquent behavior, Patterson et al. (2000) wanted to know why some youth engage in delinquent activities while others do not. They hypothesized that youth with early involvement with deviant peers would ultimately engage in delinquent activities. Using longitudinal data they assessed the impact of peer influence on substance use, high risk sexual behavior, and police arrests among youth ages 10 through 18. They found that at least among boys, early involvement with deviant peers did not exclusively influence new forms of deviancy. Instead, it was the level of deviancy within a peer group, the rate of reinforcement and the amount of unsupervised time that served as the mechanisms for the new development of deviant behaviors. Patterson et al. (2000) speculated that the development of future delinquent behavior was spawned by disrupted parenting and the availability of delinquent youth and proposed a nuanced version of peer influence on delinquent behavior known as the metamorphosis model. This model is particularly relevant to foster youth given their disrupted family and social support networks, and, the likelihood that they will come into contact with delinquent youth. Consequently, there is a need for research on the deviant peer affiliations of foster care youth and the connection of these affiliations across a range of life outcomes as well as in relation to background characteristics (i.e., demographic, personality, behavioral). The goal of this paper is to examine these factors by employing latent profile analysis to explore the heterogeneity of these affiliations and add new research on the role of peers in the lives of these youth.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and procedures

Between December 2001 and May 2003, all youth turning age 17 in the foster care system in eight Missouri counties were considered for this study. The child welfare system in Missouri is generally considered comparable to that of other states within the United States. Missouri Division of Family Services (MDFS) case workers screened the youth for potential inclusion in the study; excluding youth with IQ scores below 70 ($n=31$), placements over 100 miles

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