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# Educational attainment for youth who were maltreated in adolescence: Investigating the influence of maltreatment type and foster care placement

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## ABSTRACT

Decades of research have consistently shown a link between foster care and low rates of high school completion. Despite the overwhelming knowledge surrounding this association, it remains unclear whether the low rates of high school completion are due to placement in foster care or the maltreatment and other contextual factors that foster care youth have experienced. This study examined the extent to which (a) maltreatment type and (b) foster care placement were associated with the educational attainment of 337 maltreated adolescents. Logistic regression analyses were conducted using two waves of data and the ACR dataset of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). After controlling for academic risk factors related to the adolescents (age, race, and gender), their family (household poverty and parental education), and their environment (community environment), neither maltreatment type nor foster care placement status were associated with subsequent high school completion.

Overall, only 58% of the maltreated adolescents reported completing their education. That is about 15% less than the national average at the time data were collected for this study. Results, overall, suggest a need for educational supports and interventions for youth who experience maltreatment during their adolescent years, regardless of maltreatment type and foster care placement.

## 1. Introduction

Decades of research have consistently shown a link between foster care and low rates of high school completion (Barth, 1990; Blome, 1997; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Clemens, 2014; Festinger, 1983; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004). Despite the overwhelming knowledge surrounding these associations, it remains unclear whether the low rates of high school completion are due to placement in foster care or the maltreatment and other contextual factors that foster care youth have experienced. While several researchers have begun detangling the impact foster care placement has on academic achievement by comparing the educational outcomes of maltreated youth in foster care to their maltreated peers who remain in their family homes (i.e., Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013; Piescher, Colburn, LaLiberte, & Hong, 2014), research remains limited in providing a clear understanding on the influence foster care placement and adolescent maltreatment has on high school completion. To the author's knowledge, no study to date has compared their high school completion rates of maltreated adolescents who received the intervention of foster care to their maltreated peers who remained in their family homes.

A high school education is a conduit to financial capability and one of the strongest predictors of adult self-sufficiency. Individuals

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who complete their high school education have lower rates of unemployment, living in poverty, early parenting, incarceration, and involvement in criminal activities when compared to people who did not complete a high school education (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). This is the case for completion through both the traditional high school diploma and the GED (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). Although individuals who earn their high school credentialing through a high school diploma are more likely to pursue post-secondary education and experience consistent labor market participation, both educational avenues produce significantly better outcomes than not completing any high school credentialing (Stark et al., 2015). Beyond the psycho-social benefits, education is one of the strongest predictors of health outcomes (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Considering the many benefits of completing a high school education, it is likely that high school completion will be one of the most promising mechanisms for mitigating the effects of maltreatment and subsequent foster care placement (Casey Family Programs, 2003). It is therefore important for researchers to study high school completion with the goal of identifying factors that promote optimal educational attainment for maltreated youth with and without foster care experience.

Guided by the ecological model of human development, this study sought to investigate the roles that maltreatment and foster care placement have on the high school completion rates of youth involved with the child welfare system during their adolescent years. The ecological model provides a framework for understanding and examining the educational attainment of youth who were maltreated in adolescence. The model emphasizes the importance of understanding development in context as a joint function of the interaction between the developing adolescent, time, and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Completing an education is affected by multiple factors. In addition to their family systems and their neighborhoods/social support systems, maltreatment during adolescence and subsequent foster care placement introduces new factors that may complicate adolescent development. These factors may potentially influence subsequent educational development.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Maltreatment and high school completion

Maltreatment is a major social welfare problem in the United States. In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2015, the most recent data available to the public, 4.1 million maltreatment referrals were made to Child Protective Services (CPS) (US DHHS, 2017). The rates of maltreatment victimization tend to decrease with each additional year, but adolescents are at increased risk for being maltreated (Garbarino, 1989). Approximately 26% of the victims of abuse and neglect annually are adolescents 11 years of age or older (US DHHS, 2017). Adolescent maltreatment is a serious concern, as this developmental period directly precedes adulthood. Maltreatment may interrupt the process of adolescent development and hinder children's ability to successfully transition to adulthood and achieve optimal adult development (AFC, 2012).

Maltreatment, overall, has been linked to a wide range of negative outcomes, including, but not limited to, poor academic achievements and high rates of special education (Johnson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004; Perez & Widom, 1994), underemployment (Currie & Widom, 2010), post-traumatic-stress disorder (Andrews, Corry, Slade, Issakidis, & Swanston, 2004; Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2001; Lansford et al., 2002), juvenile delinquency (Hubbard & Pratt, 2002; Widom, 1989), adult criminal activity (Widom, 1989), teen pregnancy (Wilson & Widom, 2008), low health-related quality of life (Corso, Edwards, Fang, & Mercy, 2008), and substance use/abuse (Moran, Vuchinich, & Hall, 2004). Although the maltreatment literature is expansive, research focused specifically on the outcomes of children who were maltreated in adolescence is more limited. The research that has specifically focused on the consequences of adolescent maltreatment has linked maltreatment to illicit drug use and delinquency (Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005), internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Ireland, Smith, & Thornberry, 2002; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001), risky sex behaviors (Thornberry, Henry, Ireland, & Smith, 2010), criminal victimization (Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991), and incarceration (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000).

Despite these negative consequences that have been associated with maltreatment, education has been shown to be a positive, protective factor (Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010; Topitzes, 2006; Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2011). Completion of a high school education mediates the relationship between maltreatment and criminal activity (Topitzes, 2006; Topitzes et al., 2011). Additionally, maltreated foster care youth who obtain a high school diploma have lower rates of early pregnancy (Perper et al., 2010) and have higher employment earnings (Okpych & Courtney, 2014) than maltreated, foster care youth who do not complete their education.

Unfortunately, research consistently shows that maltreated youth both with (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Stone, 2007) and without (Currie & Widom, 2010; McGloin & Widom, 2001) foster care experience are less likely to complete their high school education when compared to their peers in the general population. Although the link between maltreatment and low rates of high school completion has been widely studied, research is limited in examining the link between maltreatment that is experienced in adolescence and high school completion. Some literature combines maltreated children of all ages by examining the influence of maltreatment experienced by children ages 0–17 (Smith, Park, Ireland, Elwyn, & Thornberry, 2013). Other researchers have looked at maltreatment that occurred prior to being school-aged (Currie & Widom, 2010), maltreatment that occurred any time prior to age 16 (Boden, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2007), maltreatment that occurred prior to the 6th grade (Fang & Tarui, 2015), and maltreatment that occurred any time prior to age 11 (Perez & Widom, 1994). To the author's knowledge, no research examining completion of high school education as an outcome focuses specifically on maltreatment that occurred during adolescence. Childhood and adolescence are distinct developmental periods. Children who were maltreated in early and middle childhood may react to the maltreatment differently and may have different educational outcomes as a result of maltreatment than children who were maltreated during adolescence. More research is needed to examine the effect adolescent maltreatment has on educational attainment.

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