



JANUARY 2007

Offending During Late Adolescence: How Do Youth Aging Out of Care Compare with Their Peers?

BY GRETCHEN R. CUSICK AND MARK E. COURTNEY

Young people involved with the child welfare system face many challenges as they approach the transition to adulthood, including staying out of trouble. Although heavily debated due to methodological issues, studies generally show a positive association between maltreatment and delinquency (McCord, 1983; Widom, 1989; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Maxfield & Widom, 1996), putting youth placed in out-of-home¹ care for reasons of abuse or neglect at risk for offending. In addition to the risk associated with their maltreatment history, youth placed in out-of-home care typically come from disadvantaged families and neighborhoods. By late adolescence and early adulthood, they have low educational status, little employment experience, mental health problems, high rates of homelessness, and limited social and financial resources (Collins, 2001). On top of these disadvantages, youth generally lose the support of the child welfare system at the end of adolescence. Although formal independent living services exist to help youth formerly in out-of-home care move into adulthood, these youth are largely on their own when making the transition (Courtney & Hughes, 2005).

Perhaps not surprising given these many risk factors, research suggests that youth formerly placed in out-of-home care have higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system than those in the general population (McCord, McCord, & Thurber, 1960; Barth, 1990). Limited attention has been paid, however, to offending among foster youth specifically during the period of late adolescence and early adulthood. Offending is likely to be high among foster youth during late adolescence because, in general, it is during this period that offending increases (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Farrington, 1986). Yet, little is known about whether young people aging out² of the child welfare system desist from offending as they transition to adulthood.

1. We use the term “out-of-home care” to describe all youth placed under the supervision of the child welfare system for reasons of abuse or neglect rather than delinquent behavior. This includes youth placed in relative (kinship care) and non-relative foster homes, group homes/residential treatment facilities, adoptive placements, and independent living arrangements.

2. Aging out refers to the process of being discharged from the child welfare system due to age ineligibility rather than being discharged due to adoption or reunification with one’s family of origin.

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This paper presents data on self-reported offending during the periods of late adolescence and early adulthood in a sample of young people aging out of the child welfare systems across three Midwestern states and a nationally representative sample of same-aged peers. In particular, two issues are addressed: 1) how youth in out-of-home care compare to youth more generally in terms of self-reported offending during the early transition to adulthood and 2) whether offending declines between late adolescence and early adulthood among youth who have aged out of out-of-home care.

Data presented in this brief come from two sources. First, we used data from the Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (the Midwest Study), which is a longitudinal study following the progress of a sample of 732 youth placed in out-of-home care due to abuse and/or neglect (as opposed to delinquency) across three Midwestern states who reached the age of 17 while in out-of-home care and had been in care for at least 1 year prior to their seventeenth birthday. We present data from the first interview, when youth were approximately 17–18 years old, and the first follow-up interview at age 19. During the first interview, questions on offending were answered by all but two youth in the sample ($n=730$). After attrition, the sample during the second wave of interviews consisted of 603 respondents (82% of participants in the first interview), of which 95 percent reported on offending behavior ($n=574$). In order to compare offending among this sample of youth placed in out-of-home care to youth more generally, we also used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), which is a nationally representative study that examines the causes of health-related behaviors of adolescents and their outcomes in young adulthood. Data were taken from Wave 1 of the Add Health study, consisting of 17–18-year-old respondents ($n=1938$), and from Wave 3 of the study, consisting of 19-year-old respondents ($n=499$).

Comparisons Across Samples: Demographic Characteristics

Because one goal of this study was to illustrate any differences in offending between youth placed in out-of-home care and youth more generally, we first compared the samples to determine any differences across demographic characteristics of gender and race, two factors known to be associated with crime and delinquency. As shown in Table 1, the Midwest Study and Add Health study had similar gender distributions.

Table 1

Gender and Race Distributions of the Midwest and Add Health Samples

	17–18 years old		19 years old	
	Midwest Study (%) ($n=730$)	Add Health (%) ($n=1,938$)	Midwest Study (%) ($n=574$)	Add Health (%) ($n=499$)
Gender				
Female	51.5	49.8	54.1	57.4
Male	48.5	50.2	45.9	42.6
Race				
White	31.9	67.2	30.8	68.9
African American	57.0	18.0	56.2	18.9
Asian	.5	1.0	.5	3.4
American Indian	1.4	3.4	1.3	2.8
Multiracial	9.7	4.0	10.3	4.6
Unknown/Missing	.5	6.4	.8	1.4

The racial distributions, however, were significantly different across the two samples during each age period. The Midwest Study sample had a higher percentage of African American and multiracial youth, while the Add Health sample was largely made up of white youth. The high percentage of African American youth in the Midwest sample is not surprising, given that African American children are historically and currently overrepresented in the child welfare system (Shyne & Schroeder, 1978; Stehno, 1982; Lu et al., 2004). These different racial distributions, however, make comparing the samples on criminal behavior problematic because African American youth tend to have higher rates of both official and self-reported offending than Caucasian youth (Elliot & Ageton, 1980; Hawkins et al., 2000), particularly for serious violent behaviors (McNulty & Bellair, 2003). Given the differences in both the hypothesized crime rates and racial distributions of the two samples, it would be more appropriate to compare youth aging out of the child welfare system to a sample in the general population with a more similar racial distribution. In order to account for differences in the racial distributions of the two samples, we computed a case weight for youth in the Add Health sample by dividing the percentage of Midwest Study youth who identified themselves as belonging to a particular race by the percentage of Add Health youth who identified themselves as belonging to that same race.³

3. For example, 57 percent of the Midwest Study youth were African American compared with approximately 19 percent of Add Health youth. The weight assigned to each African American youth in the Add Health sample was $57/19=3.00$.

Offending During the Transition

Figure 1 shows the percentage of youth in each sample who reported engaging in each of the criminal behaviors during the last 12 months before the interview when youth were approximately 17–18 years old. This represents offenses committed when youth were about 16–17 years old. Behaviors ranged from minor property offenses, such as taking something from a store worth less than \$50, to serious acts of violence, such as using or threatening to use a weapon to get something from someone and shooting or stabbing someone. Using independent samples t-tests to compare the proportions (not shown), we found that a significantly higher proportion of youth in the Midwest sample reported engaging in each offense. For most offenses, the proportion of youth in out-of-home care engaging in each offense was at least twice that found in the Add Health study.

Figure 1

Self-Reported Offending: Midwest vs. Add Health (17 and 18 year olds)

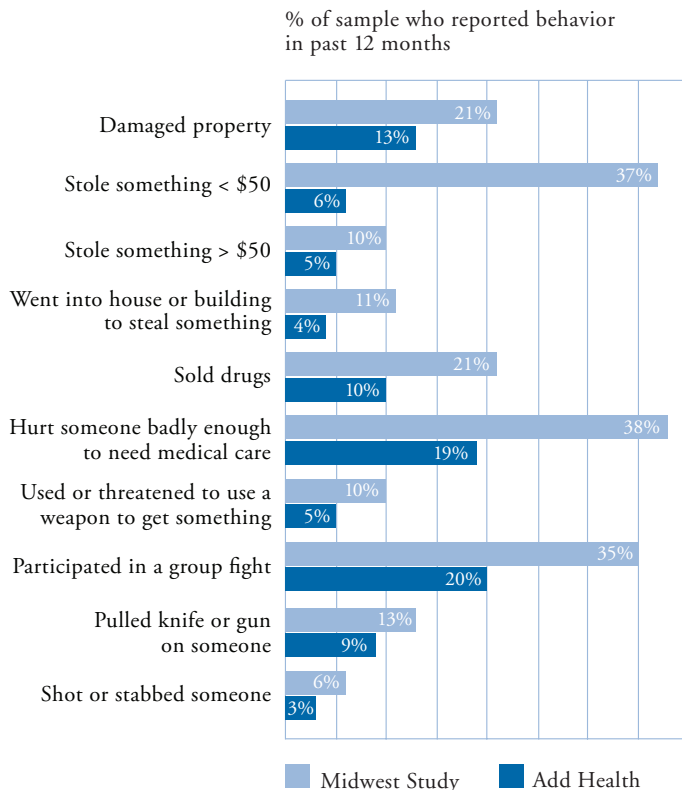
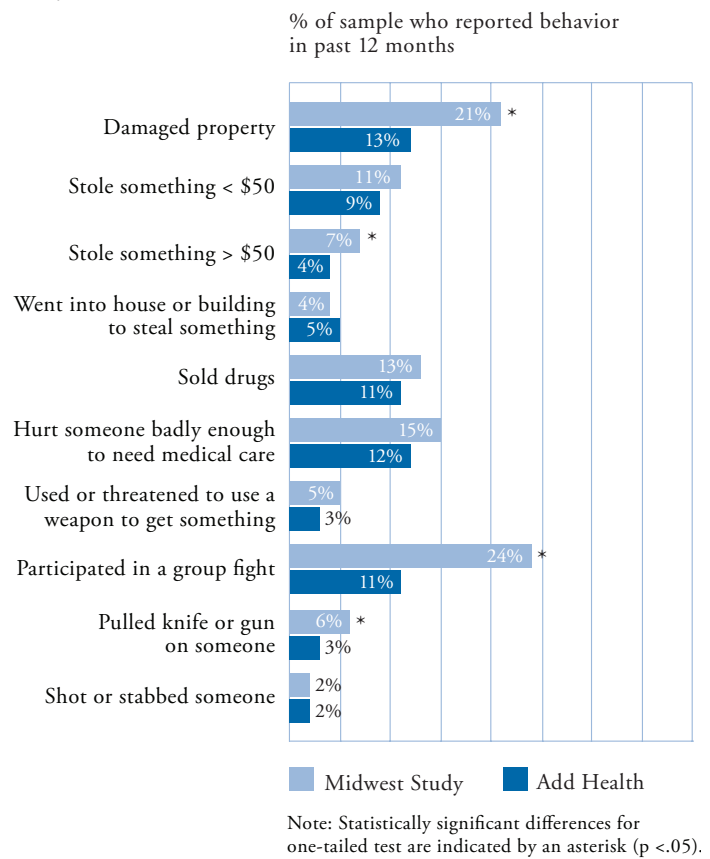


Figure 2

Self-Reported Offending: Midwest vs. Add Health (19 year olds)



We found fewer differences in offending between the youth in out-of-home care and their Add Health peers as reported at age 19 than found 2 years earlier. As shown in Figure 2, offending at about age 18 was lower in general for both foster youth and youth in general than offending at ages 16–17. Yet, a significantly higher proportion of youth in out-of-home care reported damaging property, stealing something worth more than \$50, taking part in a group fight, and pulling a knife or gun on someone. Although the sample sizes are smaller during this second period, and thus, the power to detect variation across samples is reduced, it does not appear that this explains the lack of many statistically significant differences across the groups. Unlike the comparisons made during late adolescence, few offenses differed by more than 2 to 3 percent across the two groups. We note, however, that youth in out-of-home care are more likely to engage in some violent offenses, with nearly a quarter participating in a group fight and 6 percent having pulled a knife or gun on someone.

Large differences across the two groups, however, are seen when comparing self-reported arrests. As shown in Table 2, a significantly higher proportion of youth in out-of-home

care reported having ever been arrested by age 19 and having been arrested since age 18 when compared to youth in general. This is true for both males and females. For example, 57 percent of male foster youth reported ever being arrested compared to only 20 percent of males in the Add Health sample. For recent arrests since age 18, we found an even larger difference, with 36 percent of male foster youth reporting at least one arrest compared to only 2 percent of other males. Even more striking, the percentage of female foster youth ever experiencing an arrest was not only higher than females in the Add Health sample, but also higher than that for Add Health males. The higher levels of self-reported arrest among foster youth could reflect the tendency for youth in out-of-home care to engage in violent behaviors at higher rates than youth in general, as shown above. Alternatively, higher arrest rates could be a result of greater scrutiny being applied to foster youth by child welfare authorities and the police.

Table 2

Self-Reported Arrests: Midwest Study vs. Add Health Study

	Males		Females	
	Midwest Study	Add Health Study	Midwest Study	Add Health Study
Ever arrested by age 19	57.0	20.1	34.4	2.8
Arrested since age 18	35.9	1.9	17.9	1.1

Table 3

Percentage Engaging in Selected Offenses (17–18 year olds)

	Females		Males	
	Midwest Study	Add Health	Midwest Study	Add Health
Damaged property	15.7	8.0*	26.6	17.8*
Stole something < \$50	31.9	10.9*	42.7	20.7*
Stole something > \$50	5.0	3.0*	14.9	6.5*
Went into house or building to steal something	5.8	2.4*	16.9	6.5*
Sold drugs	14.1	4.7*	27.9	14.7*
Hurt someone badly enough to need medical care	27.1	8.6*	50.0	29.7*
Used or threatened to use a weapon to get something	5.9	3.2*	14.7	6.9*
Participated in a group fight	28.5	12.1*	42.4	28.6*
Pulled knife or gun on someone	9.0	3.1*	16.7	13.9
Shot or stabbed someone	4.0	.1*	7.1	5.6

Note: Statistically significant differences for one-tailed test are indicated by an asterisk ($p < .05$).

Variation in Offending by Gender

In general, males have higher rates of delinquent and criminal behavior than females (Hagan, Gillis, & Simpson, 1985; Sheldon & Chesney-Lind, 1995). We found this to be true for our sample of youth aging out of the child welfare system as well. For most offenses, males in the Midwest Study had higher rates of offending than did females during both late adolescence and early adulthood.

We compared offending in the Midwest and Add Health samples by gender to determine if the differences noted above were true for both males and females separately. As shown in Table 3, we found a significantly higher proportion of female foster youth reported all offenses when compared to female youth in general at ages 17–18. A higher proportion of male foster youth also reported each offense, with the exception of pulling a knife or gun on someone and shooting or stabbing someone, for which the two samples did not differ.

A somewhat different picture emerged, however, when comparing offending as reported at age 19 across the two samples by gender (see Table 4). A significantly higher proportion of female foster youth reported all offenses except stealing something worth less than \$50, selling drugs, and shooting or stabbing someone. The only significant difference between male foster youth and male youth

Table 4

Percentage Engaging in Selected Offenses (19 year olds)

	Females		Males	
	Midwest Study	Add Health	Midwest Study	Add Health
Damaged property	17.6	4.2*	25.8	20.7
Stole something < \$50	6.9	4.6	15.2	14.5
Stole something > \$50	4.7	1.0*	10.2	8.3
Went into house or building to steal something	1.9	.3*	6.3	9.5
Sold drugs	6.3	6.2	21.1	16.3
Hurt someone badly enough to need medical care	8.5	2.9*	23.1	22.6
Used or threatened to use a weapon to get something	3.8	.5*	5.9	6.2
Participated in a group fight	14.8	4.5*	34.4	19.6*
Pulled knife or gun on someone	4.4	.2*	8.2	5.8
Shot or stabbed someone	1.0	.0	3.1	4.1

Note: Statistically significant differences for one-tailed test are indicated by an asterisk ($p < .05$).

in general, however, was for participating in a group fight. Both female and male foster youth were more likely to report having been arrested since age 18 than youth more generally. Nearly 18 percent of female foster youth reported an arrest compared to only 1 percent of female youth in general, and 36 percent of male foster youth reported an arrest compared to just fewer than 3 percent of male youth in general.

Declines in Offending Among Youth in Out-of-Home Care

The Midwest Study allows us to examine changes in offending behavior among the same sample of former foster youth. We examined whether the proportion of youth in out-of-home care reporting each of the behaviors was lower at age 19 than at ages 17–18.

Statistical tests revealed that offending generally decreased over time (see Table 5). Exceptions included damaging property and stealing something worth more than \$50, in which we found no significant declines. These findings suggest that patterns of offending among youth aging out of care are similar to those seen in the general population, with offending peaking during late adolescence and appearing to decline into adulthood.

Table 5

Percentage of Foster Youth Engaging in Selected Offenses Over Time

	17–18 Year Olds	19 Year Olds
Damaged property	19.9	20.9
Stole something < \$50	36.0	10.7*
Stole something > \$50	9.3	7.2
Went into house or building to steal something	11.1	3.9*
Sold drugs	19.9	12.9*
Hurt someone badly enough to need medical care	37.2	14.9*
Used or threatened to use a weapon to get something	9.1	4.7*
Participated in a group fight	35.1	23.4*
Pulled knife or gun on someone	12.8	6.1*
Shot or stabbed someone	5.1	1.9*

Note: Statistically significant differences for one-tailed test are indicated by an asterisk ($p < .05$).

Limitations

This brief provides basic information comparing offending of young people aging out of the child welfare system to that of youth more generally. The findings that foster youth have higher levels of offending than their same-aged peers, even after accounting for differences in racial distributions, indicate that this group is at high risk for both offending and criminal justice system involvement during the transition to adulthood. These findings, however, do not provide evidence

regarding whether youths' placement experiences in out-of-home care have anything to do with their behavior or justice system involvement. Further multivariate analyses of self-reported offending and arrest are needed to determine how placement experiences, as well as risk factors such as substance abuse, mental health and behavior problems, and prior abuse and neglect, or protective factors, such as social support, service receipt, and educational progress, make offending more or less likely among these young people aging out of care.

Summary

In comparing offending during the transition to adulthood between a sample of youth aging out of the child welfare system and a national sample of youth, we found:

- Overall, there were striking differences in offending reported between 17–18-year-old youth aging out of care and their same-aged peers. Youth aging out of the child welfare system had higher rates of offending across a range of behaviors from property crimes to serious violent crimes.
- We found fewer differences in offending between the sample of youth aging out of care and a national sample at age 19, although offending overall was lower in both groups. Foster youth were more likely to report damaging property, stealing something worth more than \$50, participating in a group fight, and pulling a knife or gun on someone. In addition, a higher percentage of foster youth reported having been arrested since age 18.
- However, differences in offending between foster youth and youth more generally vary by gender. Female foster youth were more likely to report engaging in most offenses at ages 17–18 and 19. Conversely, although male foster youth were more likely to offend across the range of behaviors at age 17–18, no differences, with the exception of group fighting, were found among males at age 19.
- Both male and female foster youth were over ten times more likely to report having been arrested since age 18 than youth in the Add Health study.
- As has been found in prior research on the age distribution of crime, offending tended to decrease among youth aging out of the child welfare system as reported at ages 17–18 and age 19.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank our funders, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, the Iowa Department of Human Services, and the National Institute of Justice for their financial support. The study would not have been possible without the efforts of Lori Moreno and Andrea Ingram from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Paula Brown and John Tuohy from the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, and Holli Noble from the Iowa Department of Human Services. We also wish to thank Kerryann DiLoreto, Jeremy Kraft and the many interviewers at the University of Wisconsin Survey Center in Madison, Wisconsin for collecting the survey data on which this report is based.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2005-IJ-CX-0031 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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