SYSTEMIC COMPONENTS OF CARE THAT AFFECT SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

by

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Abstract

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Although research indicates that former foster youth fare poorly in a number of domains of self-sufficiency upon leaving care, it is unclear whether their poor outcomes are related to systemic components of care. The purpose of this study was to examine the systemic components of foster care that either promote or inhibit self-sufficiency in foster youth once they transition from care through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. Using data gathered from both Child Protective Services and Transitional Resource Action Center's databases, the study described in this dissertation explored factors of care that most influence former foster youth's self-sufficiency. Results indicated that none of the factors of care fully explained youth's self-sufficiency. Findings are discussed in relation to both ecological and developmental theory.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her."
Urie Bronfrenbrenner (1991, p. 2)

Over the course of their lives, youth in foster care face a disproportionate number of challenges. First, they are removed from their homes due to some traumatic event such as abuse, neglect, abandonment, or death of a parent/caregiver (Texas Department, 2012). These children are often abruptly taken by strangers and are allowed only what can fit in a garbage bag. Then they are told they are going to live with another group of strangers. For many children, this is as traumatic as the original event that caused their removal. Often, over the course of their time in foster care, many youth are moved at least once and some are moved much more often (Schelble, Franks, & Miller, 2010; Zetlin et al., 2006a). Due to the disruption of moving, affected youth struggle academically, have difficulty in making lasting relationships, and too often their physical and mental health care suffers (Christian, 2003; Muson & Freundlich, 2008; Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008). Finally, in many states at 18 years of age, they are effectively on their own without a safety net. They are expected to find a place to live, finish their education, find and maintain employment, and manage their finances without the customary resources a family support system provides. Many of these youth have significant difficulties transitioning into independent living.

The nation is failing foster youth. The primary goal of the child welfare system is to provide life-long connections to those youth who are in custody (Miller, 2009). The best method for achieving this goal includes kinship care, adoption, and more family-like placements. Youth who are institutionalized or in group homes do not do as well, and are less likely to form the life-long connections necessary to succeed in adulthood (Kids Count, 2011; Zuravin, Benedict, & Stallings, 1999).

The system of foster care is geared toward protection. As a result, many foster care youth are unable to participate in the typical rites of passage activities in which a child living at home would participate. For many foster care youth, obtaining a driver's license, working after school, staying the night at a friend's house or simply hanging out at the mall is beyond the scope of what they are allowed. While these rules are designed to keep them safe, they also severely limit their ability to become more self-sufficient and they have a difficult time once they age out of care.

It is a national responsibility to provide the best possible care for youth deemed unsafe living with their nuclear families. Acting in loco parentis, the State's responsibility is to provide youth with the necessary resources, developmentally and physically, to successfully navigate the transition from child to emerging adult. In order to provide this care, the systemic examination of factors that influence a youth's overall self-sufficiency is needed. Child Protective Services only has control over the factors within its purview, such as number of placements, more home-like placements, number of workers, length of time in care, and receipt of independent living services. Once the factors are identified that negatively impact youth's self-sufficiency, specific systemic changes can be made to improve youth's overall self-sufficiency.

Youth Outcomes

Nationally, the outcomes for youth aging out of foster care are dismal. Children leaving substitute care often lack the familial supports youth have who have not been in substitute care. Most children leaving substitute care do not have the financial, medical, or social support tools necessary to successfully bridge this transition, placing a significant burden on youth leaving care (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Ferrari, 2011). Although reports vary, outcomes overwhelmingly are negative for youth leaving foster care.

Many do not have a high school diploma or GED when they emancipate from care (Bruskas, 2008, Wagner & Wonacott, 2008, Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007, Courtney & Dworsky, 2005, 2007). Additionally, youth while still in care, have many educational deficits ranging from low standardized test scores to multiple transfers between schools (Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). Educational deficits increase the likelihood of challenges in a number of areas, such as employment, housing, and income stability (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stallings, 1996; Choca et al., 2004; Curtis, 2011; Cushing, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Fowler et al., 2009; Georgiades, 2005; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Reilly, 2003).

Former foster youth experience serious financial problems. Between 12% and 30% of former foster youth received public assistance (Hollander, Budd, Petulla, & Staley, 2007; Pecora et al., 2003; Wagner & Wonacott, 2008). Additionally, 11% to 36% of former foster youth report being homeless for at least one night since leaving substitute care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Pecora et al., 2003; Scannapieco et al., 2007; Wagner & Wonacott, 2008). Many former foster youth report having difficulty finding and maintaining employment. Reports on employment suggest that on average only one-third to one-half of youth out of substitute care are employed, but the literature does not specify full time vs. part time employment (Courtney et al., 2007; Hollander et al., 2007; Scannapieco et al., 2007).

Furthermore, many youth transitioning out of care experience a preponderance of mental health and physical health issues. Foster youth are significantly more likely than non-foster youth to have mental health, physical health, and behavioral problems. Studies suggest more than 50% of foster youth have at least one mental health diagnosis, physical health problem, or behavioral problem (Allen & Bissell, 2004;

Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Love, McIntosh, Rosst, & Tertzakian, 2005; McMillen & Raghaven, 2009; Reilly, 2003). Additionally, the literature suggests that between 25% and 75% of girls will either have had a pregnancy or will have a pregnancy within four years of emancipating (Scannapieco et al., 2007; Pecora et al., 2003). Furthermore, a plethora of research suggests that emancipated youth do not have adequate access to either mental health or physical health care (Allen & Bissell, 2004; Anctil et al., 2007; English et al., 2003; Ensign, 2001; Hansen et al., 2004; Kerker & Dore, 2006; McMillen & Raghaven, 2009; Pasztor et al., 2006; Risley-Curtiss & Stiltes, 2007; Schneiderman et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2009; Shin, 2005; Sullivan & van Zyle, 2008; Wagner & Wonacott, 2008).

Health issues for foster youth are exacerbated by significantly higher drug and alcohol use and dependency than the comparable non-foster youth population. Pilowsky and Wu (2006) found that former foster youth are 1.5 times more likely to use alcohol, 3.8 times more likely to have alcohol dependence, 2.4 times more likely to use illicit drugs, and 4.8 times more likely to have drug dependence.

Finally, former foster youth are more likely to engage in illegal behavior and are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Courtney et al. (2007) report youth emancipated from care are more likely to be involved in a gang, damaging property, and engaging in group fighting. Additionally, other studies suggest an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal activity, being arrested, and being convicted of at least one crime (Bruskas, 2008; Ryan et al., 2007; Scannapieco et al., 2007; Wagner & Wonacott, 2008).

Description of Youth in Foster Care

Two databases were examined to describe youth in foster care. The Child Welfare Information Gateway is a national database, which provides national data on

youth in foster care (Child Welfare, 2012). The Texas 2011 Data Book was used to obtain the most current data on Texas' foster youth (Texas Department, 2012). Although both datasets describe youth in care, the formats of the two datasets make a direct comparison difficult.

National Demographic Data of Foster Care Youth

Table 1-1 provides a brief description of the national demographic data on foster care youth in the United States as of September 30, 2010, the last time national data was available (Child Welfare, 2012).

Table 1-1 Number of Children, Gender, Age and Race of Foster Care Youth Nationally

	Living in Foster Care	Entering Foster Care	Exiting Foster Care
Number of Children	408,425	254,375	254,114
Gender			
Male	52%		
Female	48%		
Median Age	9.2 years	6.7 years	8.8 years
Race			
White/Non-Hispanic	41%	45%	43%
African American	29%	24%	27%
Hispanic	21%	21%	20%
Other	10%	10%	10%

Time spent in foster care. The length of time children spend in foster care varies significantly. In fiscal year 2010, 13% of children had been in care less than one month; 33% had been in care from one to 11 months; 24% had been in care for 12 to 23 months, 12% had been in care for 24 to 35 months; 10% had been in care for 36 to 59 months; and 7% had been in care for 60 or more months (Child Welfare, 2012). Of particular

interest is how the amount of time in foster care affects youths' overall self-sufficiency once they transition out of care.

Placement settings. In fiscal year 2010, approximately 408,425 children live in a variety of placement settings. The majority (48%) were living in non-relative foster homes; 26% were living in kinship care (relative foster care); 9% were living in some form of formal institution such as a treatment facility or a criminal justice setting; 6% were living in group homes; 5% were living in either a pre-adoptive home or on a trial visit with either a prospective foster or adoptive family; 2% had run away and 1% were in supervised independent living (Child Welfare, 2012).

Why children leave foster care. Children leave foster care for many reasons. In the fiscal year 2010, 51% were reunited with parent(s) or primary caregiver(s), 21% were adopted, 14% went to live with a relative or guardian, 11% emancipated, and 3% had other outcomes (Child Welfare, 2012).

Demographics of Texas Foster Care Youth

In the fiscal year 2011, 17,108 children were removed from their homes through a confirmed investigation of abuse, neglect, or some other form of maltreatment by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. As of the end of the FY 2011, 17,183 children were in foster care. Table 1-2 provides a description of the demographic data on youth in foster care at the end of Texas' Fiscal Year 2011 based on the DFPS 2011 Data Book (2012).

Table 1-2 Texas Demographic Data of Foster Youth by Number of Children, Gender, Age, and Race Living in Foster Care as of August 31, 2011

Number of Children	17,183
Gender	
Male	54.2%
Female	45.8%
Age	
< 2 years old	22.1%
3-5 years old	16.9%
6-9 years old	17.2%
10-13 years old	17.3%
14-17 years old	23.1%
18-21 years old	3.4%
Race	
White/non-Hispanic	29.4%
African American	30.3%
Hispanic	38.1%
Native American	0.3%
Asian	0.3%
Other	1.7%

Time in foster care. Of the total number of children residing in foster care, 1,410 (8.8%) children emancipated directly from paid foster care. An additional 229 (1.4%) children left foster care without permission, were in an independent living placement, a court ordered placement, conservatorship was not obtained for the child, or they had a missing discharge reason. The remainder of youth leaving foster care was adopted, reunified with their family or a family member obtained custody (Texas Department, 2012).

Placement settings. Foster children in Texas live in a variety of out of home settings. The majority (*n* = 13,944) were living in non-relative foster homes, and 9,858 were living in kinship care. Of the remainder, 782 were living in basic child care settings; 1,509 were living a residential treatment center; 868 were living in pre-adoptive homes;

553 were in an emergency shelter, 395 were in other types of care such as hospitals, juvenile detention, camps, state school, and maternity homes; 554 were in another type of substitute care such as an independent living program or were runaways (Texas Department, 2012).

Why children leave foster care. Children in Texas exit foster care for a variety of reasons. Of the 16,087 children leaving foster care in 2011, the majority (33.4%) left foster care because they were reunified with their family; 28.8% were adopted; 27.6% were living with a relative; 8.8% age out of foster care; and 1.4% left foster care for other reasons (Texas Department, 2012).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the exosystem and macrosystem supports and services provided to youth in state foster care that either promote or inhibit youth's self-sufficiency once they transition from care. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory, specifically the exosystem and macrosystem, this study examined a sample of youth who aged out of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Child Protective Services (CPS) Unit, who received services from the Transition Resource Action Center (TRAC) and were living independently. Using a self-sufficiency scale developed from TRAC's self-sufficiency matrix, this study examined five domains of self-sufficiency: (a) education, (b) employability, (c) employment, (d) financial literacy, and (e) shelter.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

This chapter addresses the literature reviewed for fulfilling the purpose of the study. A search of multiple databases was conducted to identify articles relevant to this review. The purpose of this study is to explore what supports and services provided to youth in care most promote or inhibit youth's overall self-sufficiency once they leave care. Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Science Direct, and LexisNexis were searched. Google Scholar, and Wiley InterScience were utilized to identify articles and information. The search terms used were a combination of the following: *child maltreatment, child abuse, education, foster care, foster child*, foster youth, homeless*, income, out of home placement, health, health care, mental health care, physical health, outcomes, self-sufficiency, shelter, quality of life,* and *well-being*. In an effort to evaluate the most current research, primarily articles from peer reviewed journals published between 1998 and 2012 were included. Several articles deemed fundamental or contained information not found in the ideal time frame were included.

Education

The body of literature on foster youth's educational outcomes is growing. It is assumed that education is a critical foundation for overall self-sufficiency upon reaching adulthood; thus, the preponderance of poor outcomes is an indicator that the system of foster care is failing the very youth it is designed to serve. While many traumatic events lead up to a child residing in foster care, an additional array of chaotic events affect youth once they are in care. Through all the changes facing youth remanded into custody, education may offer an opportunity for continuity and stability. Positive educational experiences may "enhance children's well-being, help them make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase the likelihood that they can achieve personal

fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency and contribute positively to society" (Munson & Freundlich, 2008, p. 1).

Many youth who have transitioned out of foster care have neither a high school diploma nor a GED equivalency (Bruskas, 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007, Wagner & Wonacott, 2008). One study found only 58% had a high school diploma or a GED (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stallings, 1996). As a result, former foster youth lag behind the general population in terms of college enrollment and completion and/or vocational training. The following review on educational outcomes details both the current literature's findings surrounding educational outcomes and the challenges youth face in completing high school, attending college, or receiving vocational training.

Academic Achievement

General struggles. The literature overwhelmingly posits that foster youth struggle academically (Altshuler, 2003; Pecora et al., 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006a). They have lower standardized test scores, are behind in math and reading, and have lower GPAs than non-foster youth (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Parrish et al., 2001; Smithgall et al., 2004, Zima et al., 2000). One study reported that youth in foster care score 16 to 20 percentile points lower on standardized tests compared to youth not in foster care (Burley & Halpren, 2001). Another study found that 47% children residing in foster group homes were in special education classes (Parrish et al., 2001).

A number of studies report many youth in foster care have been retained at least one school year (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Parrish et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2003, Zima et al., 2000). In addition, youth in care were almost twice as likely to have been retained in school as youth not in foster care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). McMillen et al (2003) found 58% of youth have failed at least one class since 7th grade (McMillen et al., 2003).

Another study found that 13% of study participants had repeated at least one grade (Zima et al., 2000). Children of color are also more likely to be retained in a grade (Children's Defense Fund, 2007).

Foster youth are also at increased risk for school suspension and/or expulsion. Zima et al (2000) found that 25% of foster youth were either suspended or expelled from school. They also found length of time in foster care is positively associated with repeating a grade. Another study reported that foster youth were suspended (73%) or expelled (16%) from school at least once since 7th grade (McMillen et al., 2003).

School and placement mobility. Contributing to this struggle is the number of school changes youth experience (Munson & Freundlich, 2008). Upon entering foster care, many youth must change schools due to placement in a foster home in a different school district from which they resided. The literature reports between two-thirds to three-fourths of foster youth must change schools upon entry into the system (Smithgall et al., 2004).

While they are in foster care, youth average one to two placement moves a year (Courtney, Terao, and Bost, 2004, Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008). With each new placement comes the possibility of having to change schools. McMillen et al. (2003) reports that 63% of youth in their study sample had at least one midyear school change since 7th grade. Other studies reported that youth retrospectively reported that they had between five and 10 or more school changes before they left high school (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). This high level of school mobility reduces the opportunity for youth to make friends, engage in extracurricular activities, and become connected to teachers. In fact, one advocacy attorney reported "there just is not the opportunity for the teachers and the caretakers to even become more familiar with what the kids know and don't know because they have moved again" (Zetlin et al., 2006a, p. 168). Moreover,

often school records are lost or misplaced, re-enrollment is delayed, credits are lost, and as a result, students suffer educational delays (Christian, 2003; Parrish et al., 2001; Taitano, 2007; Temple & Reynolds, 1999, Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006a). One study found 68% of group home operators reported delays of 40 to 82 days in receiving educational records. This delay affects the educational placement of foster youth residing in group homes (Parrish et al., 2001).

In addition to school mobility, placement mobility and time in care have been shown to negatively correspond to academic achievement. For each accumulated year a youth is care, they experience increased odds of being suspended or expelled from school. Furthermore, one additional placement was found to increase the odds of a youth lagging behind their counterparts in both math and reading skills (Zima et al., 2000).

Graduation. While agreement appears in the literature that foster youth lag behind non-foster youth academically, the rates by which former foster youth complete high school or obtain a General Educational Development (GED) certificate significantly vary by study (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Reports vary from a low of 37% to a high of 63% of youth leaving foster care without a high school diploma or GED (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Courtney et al., 2001; Reilly, T, 2003). In a study of Casey Family Services (1999), youth who remained in care longer were more likely to obtain their high school diploma or GED, suggesting extending time in care for foster youth could have a positive relationship to reaching their goals (Cushing, 2011). Dworsky and Courtney (2009) found that over one-third of youth leaving care (35.8%) had neither a high school diploma nor a GED.

Criminal justice system. Ryan, Hernandez, and Herz (2007) found that foster care youth not enrolled in school were more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system as they aged out of foster care. Another study found that youth with less

education had higher rates of incarceration (Reilly, 2003). Youth who were in a corrections facility while in care were more likely to repeat a grade in school than those youth who were never in a corrections facility (McMillen et al., 2003).

Behavior problems. Many youth in foster care also have behavior problems that exacerbate their academic difficulties. Youth display a range of externalizing behaviors and internalizing behaviors. Some youth are hostile and demanding while others are reserved and apprehensive (Zetlin et al., 2006b, Zima et al., 2000). McMillen et al. (2003) reported that 29% of the study sample had been in a physical fight with another student or a verbal fight (28%) with a teacher within the last school year. Zima et al. (2000) observed that 27% of youth scored in the clinical range for behavioral problems and 24% had at least one behavioral problem at school. Additionally those youth with externalizing behaviors are more likely to have behavior problems in school, have lower educational plans, and are at an increased risk to repeat a grade. Those with internalizing behaviors are more likely to repeat a grade (McMillen et al., 2003, Zima et al., 2000).

Benedict et al. (1996) compared foster youth placed in kinship care to non-relative foster care and found both populations experienced in-school behavior problems. However, those youth placed with family or kin experienced significantly less problems than youth not placed with family/kin. Of the youth placed in kinship care, 45% of the sample experienced behavior problems in school compared to 62% of youth not placed with family. Furthermore, of youth in kinship care, 33% had attendance problems compared to 47% of youth placed in other care (Benedict et al., 1996).

College Achievement

Relatively few current studies as reported through this literature review are available on foster youth's educational achievement beyond high school. The lack of information on educational outcomes of former foster youth is problematic because

education beyond high school is related to long-term self-sufficiency. Many youth in foster care have high educational aspirations with as many as 75% of foster care youth hoping to obtain a college degree (Reilly, 2003). McMillen et al. (2003) found that more than 60% of their sample reported wanted to obtain postsecondary education. Courtney et al. (2001) reported 92% of foster youth were optimistic about their future goals, and 79% had aspirations to enter college. While youth in foster care desire to obtain post secondary education, they are less likely than their non-foster youth peers to obtain it.

Pecora et al. (2003) found that 54.5% of Casey alumni had some college, a Bachelor's degree or more. In 1999, Casey Family Services found that 48% of alumni had some educational experience beyond high school and that for youth in long-term extended care the rate rose to 73%. A later Casey Foundation study found that of youth still in care, 27.4% were enrolled in a 4-year college and 16.1% were enrolled in a two-year college. Comparatively, only 4.1% of youth who exited foster care were enrolled in a 4-year college and 8.2% in a two-year college (Cushing, 2011). This sample appears to be unique in its high college attendance. Successful Casey Foundation alumni traditionally have extended long-term care that goes beyond their 18th birthday. As a result they may have more supports, both financial and emotional, than foster youth in a state run agency.

Studies of foster youth in state foster care have found significantly lower levels of achievement. Pecora et al. (2005) found that that former foster youth have significantly lower rates of college attendance and completion that a nationally comparative sample. Additionally, Courtney and Dworsky (2006) found former foster youth were less likely than their peers to be enrolled in post-secondary education. Wolanin (2005) found that of former foster youth who qualified to attend college, only 20% actually attended college

compared to 60% of a nationally comparative sample. Of those who attended college, only 5% earned a degree compared to 24% of the national sample (Wolanin, 2005).

Employment

Due to many foster youth's poor educational outcomes, it is not surprising that many former foster youth also have employment difficulties. Former foster youth struggle to find and maintain stable, full-time employment. Employment, and subsequently earnings, is one of the major factors that allow youth to become self-sufficient upon leaving care. The majority of studies found that former foster youth were less likely to work, less likely work full-time, and were more likely to earn less than their comparable cohorts (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stallings, 1996; Choca et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Cushing, 2011; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; George et al., 2002, McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Reilly, 2003).

One study found that after discharge from care 44% of youth were working, an additional 16.3% of youth were either looking for work or were in school, and 2.3% were unable to work due to a physical or mental disability. This study did not clarify whether the "working" cohort was working part- or full-time and did not report income level (Benedict et al., 1996). Another study found that former foster youth were less likely to work than a comparable non-foster youth sample (Choca et al., 2004). In a Casey Foundation study, Cushing (2011) found that slightly less than half of the sample reported current employment . Other studies reported a range of employment from 38% to 63% upon leaving care (George et al., 2002, McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Reilly, 2003).

Several studies found that working youth earned less than comparable non-foster youth. Cushing (2011) found that of the youth who worked, 82.3% earned less than $10,000 a year with an average salary of $8.81/hour. Reilly (2003) found that 60% of

working youth in his sample has an income less than $10,000 or less annually, and that 34% had an annual income less than $5,000. Of the respondents in Reilly's study, only 9% had an annual income greater than $20,001. Another study reported that foster youth earn less than comparison groups both before their 18th birthday and after (George et al., 2002).

Several studies found correlations between working and other factors. Benedict et al. (1996) found that a report of working in the last week was associated with older youth and having more than one caregiver before out of home placement. Cushing (2011) found that youth who left care before 18 were less likely to be employed than those who left with a permanent placement or were still in care. Behavior problems and difficulty adjusting to out of home care were negatively associated with poor employment outcomes. McMillan and Tucker (1999) found that youth who had fewer placements and completed high school were more likely to have employment than those who had higher placements and did not finish high school.

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) is a partnership between state public child welfare agencies in three states, Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children and the University of Wisconsin's Survey Center. This study provides researchers with unique opportunities to examine foster youth outcomes over time. In addition, this study provides an opportunity for comparison with youth who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) study. The Midwest Study tracked foster youth from age 17 to the most recent data reported at age 26. The Midwest Study consistently found former foster youth lagged behind their comparable counterparts in employment. As youth were preparing to transition out of care, 47.7% had work experience and 35.1% were currently working. Almost one-third of respondents

(30.3%) reported they had obtained their job through a job training program. These findings demonstrate foster youth were slightly more likely than their counterparts to have work experience (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004).

The next wave of data collected when youth were 19 showed almost 60% of Add Health youth were employed, while only 40% of former foster youth were currently employed. Of the 40% who were employed, more than 75% of them earned less than $5,000, and 90% earned less than $10,000 (Courtney et al., 2005). At age 21, only 55.5% of former foster youth reported that they were employed, while 63.9% of the Add Health participants reported employment. Additionally, former foster youth reported working on average 35.4 hours a week and earning $8.00 an hour; on average they earned $1.00 less an hour than their Add Health Counterparts (Courtney et al., 2007). At ages 23 and 24, 51.9% of non-incarcerated former foster youth were employed while 75.5% of the Add Health sample was employed.

Furthermore, the Midwest Study sample reported working on average 37 hours a week for an average of $10.14 an hour; the Add Health sample reported working an average of 40.3 hours a week for an average of $13.94 an hour (Courtney et al., 2010). The final data available from the Midwest Study is at age 26 (Courtney et al., 2011). Only 48% of the non-incarcerated Midwest Sample was currently employed, but an additional 24.7% had worked in the last year. In comparison, the Add Health sample reported that 79.6% were currently employed. As previously reported, the Midwest sample worked on average less hours than the Add Health sample (36.16 compared to 41.46 hours a week respectively. Finally, the Midwest sample reported earning an average wage of $10.73 an hour, the Add Health study participants were not asked about their hourly wage in Wave 4 (Table 2-1).

Table 2-1: Summary of Findings from the Midwest Study

	Midwest Study			Add Health Study		
Age	% Employed	Mean Hourly Income ($)	Mean Hours Working	% Employed	Mean Hourly Income ($)	Mean Hours Working
17	35.1		25.0			
19	40.5	7.5	32.6	58.2	7.57	35.2
21	55.5*	8.9*	35.4	63.9*	9.99*	35.2
23-24	51.9*	10.1*	37.0*	75.7*	13.94*	40.3*
26	48.3*	10.7	36.2*	79.9*		41.5*

Note. * Indicates a statistical difference.

Adequate employment is defined as stable employment able to meet their financial obligations. A qualitative study conducted by Freundlich and Avery (2006) reported that youth, advocates, and agency representatives had great concerns surrounding employment. Advocates and agency representatives suggested that youth must have mentoring and career counseling and work experience to be able to maintain successful employment. Youth who participated in the study suggested their primary difficulty in employment was related to poor educational outcomes and a lack of preparation for independent living.

As the above review demonstrates, former foster youth have significant difficulty in finding and maintaining adequate employment. Adequate employment is the foundation of self-sufficiency. Without steady employment, youth will be unable to meet their financial obligations. If they cannot meet their financial obligations, they will be unable to provide and maintain stable and adequate housing, health, and stability.

Financial Literacy

Employment is a crucial component in self-sufficiency, not only for the benefit of employment itself, but the income earned and the ability to use that income to remain self-sufficient. The research on former foster youth's ability to utilize their income in a manner to remain self-sufficient demonstrates that the preponderance of these youth struggle financially. They earn less and utilize governmental benefits at a higher rate than their comparable counterparts.

As discussed above, former foster youth earn significantly less than their comparable counterparts. The majority of studies (Benedict et al., 1996; Choca et al., 2004; Georgiades, 2005, Goerge et al., 2002; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012) demonstrate that former foster youth's income is below the poverty level. Of the above studies, reported employment income varied from a mean of $5,244 annually (Georgiades, 2005) to a median of $15,000 annually (Benedict et al., 1996). Reilly (2003) reported that 70% of the study participants earned less than $15,000 annually. The above studies all demonstrate that the preponderance of former foster youth earn significantly less than their non-foster care counterparts and that the majority earn below the poverty level.

In addition to earned income, many more former foster youth receive government benefits, such as TANF, AFDC, food stamps, and WIC, as compared to their non-foster youth counterparts. Cushing (2011) reported that 14.1% of Casey Foundation youth and 16.8% of Midwest Evaluation youth receive food stamps compared to 2.6% of youth in the Add Health study. Berzin (2008) found that former foster youth utilize public assistance at a significantly higher rate than non-foster youth. Georgiades (2005) found that 93% of youth who did not participate in the independent living program utilized public assistance compared with 22% who did participate in the program. Zlotnick, Tam and

Soman (2012) also found that the odds of former foster youth receiving SSDI was higher than those non-foster care counterparts. Finally, Choca et al. (2004) found that former foster youth are six times more likely to receive public assistance than their non-foster care counterparts.

Adequate income is crucial to self-sufficiency. An inadequate education often leads to reduced earnings. Without a sufficient and stable income, which includes health benefits, paid time off work for illness, and paid vacation, former foster youth struggle to maintain independence. With lower paying jobs, youth do not have the resources necessary to weather an illness or other emergency; this leads to a loss in income, which often can result in an inability to meet living expenses. This level of instability leads to many challenges including maintaining safe and adequate housing. Stable housing is a key component to maintaining stability and self-sufficiency.

Shelter

The foster care system is designed for youth to gain independent between the ages of 18 and 21. Research today tells us that most youth are not actually transitioning into full adulthood, including economic self-sufficiency, until well after their 21st birthday (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Youth aging out of the foster care system do not have the luxury of a slow transition to adult responsibilities; they simply must become self-sufficient when the state deems they it is no longer responsible for the youth's care. As a result, many former foster youth struggle with finding and maintaining adequate housing and as a result many youth find themselves homeless, couch surfing, or in sub-standard housing.

Overwhelmingly, research suggests former foster youth experience at least one night of homelessness after transitioning out of care. Multiple studies report former foster youth are significantly more likely to be homeless than the general population. The

National Alliance to End Homelessness released a report (2012) stating the odds of a person in the general population of experiencing homelessness over the course of a year is 1 in 197; yet the odds of a former foster youth in that same time period are 1 in 11. Current research examining homelessness of former foster youth showed that between 9% and 60% of former foster youth experienced a period of homelessness ranging from one night to over a week (Benedict et al. 1996; Berzin, Rhodes, & Choca et al., 2004; Curtis, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Fowler et al., 2009; Georgiades, 2005; Osgood, 2010; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003).

For those former foster youth who have some form of housing, they struggle to maintain stable housing. Housing instability is defined as frequent moves, doubling up/couch surfing, or homelessness (Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010). Research indicates that many youth move often in a relatively short period of time (Benedict et al., 1996, Berzin et al., 2011; Reilly, 2003). In addition to multiple moves, many youth also either double up or couch surf for a period of time (Cunningham et al., 2010, Courtney et al., 2010, Courtney et al., 2010, National Alliance, 2012). Youth who have insecure housing are more likely to have many difficulties reaching and maintaining self-sufficiency, such as unstable employment, increased mental and physical health problems, and more criminal convictions (Cunningham et al., 2010; Fowler et al., 2009, Yen, Hammond, & Kushel, 2009).

Systemic Factors of Care

Placement Stability

Placement stability is believed to be a crucial component to foster youth's long term well-being and self-sufficiency. The foster youth population is diverse and their needs are varied; placement stability is believed to mitigate many of the problems

associated with being in foster care. Research indicates that youth who have fewer placements fare better academically, emotionally, and are healthier (Newton et al., 2000; Rubin et al., 2004; Schelble, Franks, & Miller, 2010; Strijker et al., 2008; Zetlin et al., 2006; Zima et al., 2000). They also have more positive outcomes for employment after aging out of care (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Additionally, these youth have lower rates of substance abuse, homelessness, and less involvement with the criminal justice system (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler et al., 2009; McMillen et al., 2003; Ryan et al., 2007).

Worker Stability

A serious gap in the literature exists surrounding child welfare worker stability and youth outcomes (Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010). All youth need stability and for foster youth, whose lives are often the antithesis of stable, this is even more important. The stability of the Child Protective Services' workforce is crucial in creating long term self-sufficiency for foster youth. The continuity of a known caseworker is imperative for youth to feel a sense of trust. When that trust is broken by the caseworker leaving, the youth often is less likely to trust the next caseworker (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010).

Another major consideration is placement stability. Research suggests that the greater the number of case workers, the more placements a foster youth experiences (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). As the above literature review posits, negative outcomes are positively related to additional placements.

Finally, the more caseworkers a youth has, the less likely permanency will be achieved (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003). One study found that for youth who had only one caseworker, 3 out of 4 children achieved permanency within the study period. For one additional caseworker, the odds of a youth achieving permanency decreases to

almost 1 in 6. For a youth who has had six or more caseworkers, the odds decrease to 1 in 1000 (Flower et al., 2005).

Type of Foster Care Placement

When youth are removed from their homes, many placement options are available within four primary categories of care: (a) kinship care/foster home, relative; (b) family foster home, nonrelative; (c) group home or institution, including hospitals, child care settings, residential treatment facilities, and group homes; and (d) other, such as pre-adoptive homes, independent living arrangements, runaways, and trial home visits (Kids Count, 2011). Generally, the level of care is more restrictive for youth living in group homes or institutions than for youth living in kinship or non-relative foster care. The literature is somewhat mixed in regard to the bearing placement type has on long term self-sufficiency, but it suggests that a more family-like atmosphere is associated with more self-sufficiency (Kids Count, 2011; Zuravin, Benedict, & Stallings, 1999).

While youths have fewer problems during a kinship foster placement, once out of care few differences appear between groups (Benedict et al., 1996). Outcomes indicated adult functioning was similar on self-sufficiency dimensions such as education, employment, housing, and income (Benedict et al., 1996). Dworsky and Courtney (2009) reported youth who lived with kin while in care were neither more nor less likely to become homeless than those who were placed with non-kin. Other studies found mixed results in regards to employment (Goerge et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Finally, Zuravin et al. (1999) found that while youth in kinship foster care were overall more self-sufficient than youth in other types of foster care they were still more likely to experience homelessness than the comparison group.

On the other hand, youth who lived in a group care setting or institution were found to have more difficulty attaining self-sufficiency upon exit from care. They were

significantly more likely to become homeless or experience more housing difficulty upon exit from care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler et al., 2009). Youth were less likely to have completed an education (McMillen & Tucker, 1999) or to be employed (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Additionally, they were more likely to receive public assistance (Dworsky, 2005) and earn less than youth who aged out of group homes (Dworsky & Courtney, 2001). One study of employment obtained different results. Dworsky and Courtney (2001) found that youth who had been discharged from group homes were more likely to be employed longer than youth discharged from child care institutions.

Length of Time in Foster care

The mean length of time in foster care for all children is less than two years, yet 10% of all youth in foster care spend five or more years in care with 11% of all youth aging out of care on their 18th birthdays (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Little evidence appears in the literature directly addressing how length of time in care may affect overall self-sufficiency (Kerman, Wildfire & Barth, 2002). A weak relationship (p = 0.06) was found between length of time in care and overall self-sufficiency in Kerman et al.'s (2002) work. Another study found the longer a youth was in care to be significantly related to the odds of a youth being suspended/expelled from school (Zima et al., 2002). While Zima et al. (2002) did not address outcomes once leaving care, from previous discussed research, lower academic achievement is negatively related to self-sufficiency once aging out of care. Finally, Courtney and Barth (2006) found that youth who were in care longer had increased odds of emancipating from foster care rather than an unsuccessful discharge. It is unknown why little in the literature regarding the relationship between length of time in care and overall self-sufficiency once out of care is available, but this is an avenue that current researchers

have not pursued. Consequently, the variable *length of time in care* needs to be incorporated into statistical analysis to determine how it relates to other variables.

Preparation for Adult Living

Preparing foster youth to live independently can be a daunting task. Many of today's youth who are not in foster care are ill prepared and unable to achieve independence by their 18th birthdays (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Foster youth must overcome additional obstacles. As the literature review above demonstrates, foster youth struggle academically and some do not have a high school diploma or GED at emancipation. As a result, youth do not do well in the employment market and many live at or below the poverty level. This lack of success creates problems maintaining adequate and stable housing. As a result, foster care agencies strive to provide independent living skills to foster youth either themselves or through their foster parents. Independent living skills can take the form of workshops or classroom activities; allowing youth to gain employment experience while still in foster care and start to manage their money; foster parents including youth in many of the daily chores and activities that they will need to accomplish independently, such as cleaning, laundry, food shopping, and cooking; to providing extended care in the form of supervised independent living placements. Based on available research, no single training program has been shown to be successful.

Several researchers have found that additional training and/or supervised independent living programs provide more opportunity for youth to practice independent living skills while still being in a supportive environment (Choca et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2001; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Freundlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007; Reilly, 2003). For many youth, the more training received, the better the outcome. With additional training, youth become more satisfied with their living arrangements, feel better prepared

for living independently, gain more satisfaction overall with current living situations, and experience less trouble with the law (Reilly, 2003).

On the other hand, some researchers found a lack of evidence suggesting that additional independent living training impacted long-term self-sufficiency. Dworsky and Courtney (2009) found independent living training not to be significantly associated with housing security. Based on the qualitative study findings, many advocates for youth in foster care believe a more viable option for many youth transitioning to independence is to increase youth's connectedness with parents, relatives, and other adults in their lives. These connections could also provide youth the support necessary to navigate the transition from care to self-sufficiency (Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Freundlich et al., 2007). Finally, despite receiving independent living skills training, many youth do not believe they are prepared for the reality of living independently. Courtney et al. (2001) found that although 76% of the youth in their sample received independent living skills training, approximately 33% did not feel prepared for independent living after one year post-discharge.

Self-Sufficiency

The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary (n.d.) defined self-sufficient as, "able to maintain oneself or itself without outside aid: capable of providing for one's own needs." It is apparent from the literature reviewed earlier in this chapter that much work must be done before the majority of foster youth can be identified as self-sufficient (Berzin et al., 2011; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Choca et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2001; Cushing, 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; George et al., 2002; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003). Several interrelated components must all be met for youth to successfully transition out of foster care. These include education, employment, financial literacy, and shelter (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012;

McDonald et al., 1996). Youth need to successfully complete high school or obtain a GED to obtain adequate employment; preferably they can attain post-secondary education, which can include technical training or college degree attainment. Without sufficient education, their options in obtaining adequate employment become severely limited (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stallings, 1996; Cushing, 2011; George et al., 2002; Riley, 2003).

Adequate employment that leads to self-sufficiency includes earning a living wage full-time with health benefits and the ability to take time off from work due to illness (Alfred & Martin, 2007; Cheng, 2010). Employment based on an hourly wage, without provisions for compensation during illness, leaves youth at the mercy of one major illness rendering them unemployed and unable to care for their basic survival needs (Center for Women, 2002). An inadequate income or one that varies week to week and is based on a minimum hourly wage does not offer sufficient stability to afford adequate and stable housing (Bratt, 1996). Many youth beginning to live independently have the knowledge they can depend on familial supports if they have difficulties. Most foster youth either do not have adult caregivers to whom they can turn for support during crises or they must depend on the very people from whom they were removed as children. All of these factors are interrelated for youth to be self-sufficient. When one component fails, it makes meeting the other components that much more difficult. Understanding the systematic factors that influence the success or failure of successfully achieving self-sufficiency is of upmost importance. Identifying what in the foster care system is working and what needs to be revised will more clearly identify how the foster care system can best support and care for youth in its care.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Overview

The purpose of this study is to explore what supports and services provided to youth in care most promote or inhibit youth's overall self-sufficiency once they leave care. This study will examine the systemic factors of care within the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Children's Protective Services, and how its policies and practices either promote or inhibit youths' self-sufficiency once they transition out of foster care. Bronfenbrenner suggested the most important factors in a child's development are the relationships or influences in a child's immediate environment (Brendtro, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 2005). He further stated that a disruption in a child's immediate environment has a direct correlation in a child's maladaptive behavior. Finally, Bronfenbrenner (2005) suggested that the most effective interventions are those that target the child's immediate environment.

The ecological approach allows researchers to examine the transactions between and among systems "at the interface or point at which the individual and the environment meet" (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1990, p. 118). Bronfenbrenner's *ecological systems theory* provides a framework to examine those systemic factors of care. Ecological systems theory posits that an interaction among five distinct, yet interrelated, systems shape and define an individual. These systems are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Microsystem

The microsystem includes a child's immediate environment including those aspects of a child's life that directly influence their social, emotional, and physical growth; in other words, their daily lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005; Garbarino, 1982). When children are very young, their microsystem includes their immediate family

members and possibly day care providers. As they age and go to school their microsystem grows to include other microsystems, such as school, friends, church, and/or structured activities, such as team sports or scouting. A youth's microsystem typically expands as they age (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Garbarino, 1982).

Foster youth have additional microsystems such as their foster family, child welfare workers, and any other persons in their life as a result of them being in foster care. These other persons could be the guardian ad litem or a CASA worker. Youth are both influenced by and influencers of these microsystems through reciprocity. Bronfenbrenner posited, as long as these increased relationships provide more enduring reciprocal relationships, a youth's development is enriched (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is when these more numerous and complex relationships in the foster child's microsystem are not enduring and reciprocal that the youth's development, and thus long term self-sufficiency, is stunted (Bruskas, 2010; Swick & Williams, 2006).

Mesosystem

The next system level identified by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 2005) is the mesosystem. The mesosystem occurs as a result of the interrelationships between a child's microsystems. The more robust and interconnected a child's mesosystem, the greater the influence on a child's overall development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Examples of mesosystems include the relationship between a child's family and his/her teacher, the relationship between the child's family and his/her friends, and the child's family members with representatives of the child's outside activities. Foster youth have additional mesosystem connections that include the child's biological family with his/her caseworker, the child's biological family and the biological family's relationship with the child's foster family, and the child's foster family with the child's caseworker. These connections between microsystems can either promote or inhibit a child's development.

Swick and Williams (2006) suggested that if these links between microsystems are not strong, the family will suffer. Garbarino (1982) postulated that while these relationships are of upmost importance for the child, the relationships among those systems in which the child is not an active participant have the most bearing on the child's overall development as the exosystem.

Exosystem

The exosystem is defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 2005) as those systems that directly influence and affect a child but within which the child is not a direct participant. Typical examples of these relationships include the school system, the parents' workplace, and parents' outside activities. For youth in foster care, these relationships become more complicated. Examples of these include the local CPS system, the caseworker's work load, how the CPS system impacts their foster care providers, and the judicial system. Children need strong advocates at this level to experience positive development (Bronfenbrenner, 1985).

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the furthest away from directly affecting the child, yet is vitally important in how a youth in foster care develops. The macrosystem is the overarching ideological philosophy within which the child resides (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005). Garbarino (1982) defined the macrosystem as "the general organization of the world as it is *and as it might be*" (p. 24). For youth not in foster care, it is the general cultural and social perception of childhood, child rearing, and family. For youth in foster care, the macrosystem includes how society view's child abuse, family preservation, the care of children removed from their biological homes, and both the state and federal departments of health, human, and child protective services.

Chronosystem

An additional system, the chronosystem, was later added by Bronfenbrenner to identify how early experiences impact later functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The chronosystem paradigm provides a method for examining how either one specific event or multiple events over time influence a child's development. For foster youth, the timing of their introduction into the foster care system may influence their overall development and resilience or may be used to inform researchers about children's overall long term success and developmental health as a result of entering the foster care system at a particular age.

Discussion

For this study, an examination of exosystem and macrosystem factors is expected to provide direction on how the systemic factors within CPS can either be sustained or further enhanced to affect youth's overall development positively and thus influence long-term self-sufficiency once they leave foster care. The need for this study stems from the inability to change a youth's history, but the likelihood of making a positive impact on their present and future. A number of systemic factors were identified in the literature as problematic, yet these factors have not been comprehensively examined quantitatively through the lens of ecological systems theory.

The literature has demonstrated that the greater the number of caseworkers, the more adverse long term effect on youth's self-sufficiency (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Flower et al., 2005; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Additionally, more placement stability for youth has been equated to better outcomes; yet youth in foster care often experience a large number of moves over the course of their stay in care (Newton et al., 2000; Rubin et al., 2004; Schelble, Franks, & Miller, 2010; Strijker et al., 2008; Zetlin et al., 2006; Zima et al., 2000). Moreover, youth who have a shorter stay in foster care and

have less restrictive placements have more positive outcomes (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler et al., 2009; Kerman et al., 2002; Kids Count, 2011; Zima et al., 2002; Zuravin et al., 1999). Finally, the literature is conflicted surrounding preparation for adult living programs. While it seems intuitive that providing the skills necessary to live independently would increase self-sufficiency, the literature is not conclusive (Choca et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2001; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Freundlich, Avery & Padgett, 2007; Reilly, 2003).

Many of these factors are examined independently or in conjunction with other variables, yet an empirical examination of the factors within the state's control is necessary. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system provides an ideal lens for examining the interconnectedness of these factors as they individually, and in conjunction with each other, influence youths' self-sufficiency once they leave care.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore what exosystem and macrosystem supports and services provided to youth in care most promote or inhibit youth's overall self-sufficiency once they leave care. The study was conducted to examine the systemic factors of the foster care system and to determine which factors are most correlated with positive self-sufficiency of youth who have aged out of the foster care system. Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory, this study examined how the interaction of the various systems impacts youth's self-sufficiency once leaving care.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) examined how youth develop within the context of system interaction and suggested that understanding an individual without understanding the context within which they are living will provide an incomplete picture. Bronfenbrenner outlined four systems within which all people live and interact: (a) the microsystem, (b) the mesosystem, (c) the exosystem, and (c) the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner provided a fifth system, the chronosystem, to display how time or the timing of significant events relates to the child's environment and overall development. How the interactions between the various systems in a child's life either promote or inhibit self-sufficiency was of interest in this study. More specifically, factors within Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Child Protective Services (CPS) Unit that may promote or inhibit self-sufficiency were predictor variables. A Self-Sufficiency Scale was developed from a self-sufficiency matrix used by the Transitional Resource Action Center (TRAC) to measure a youth's self-sufficiency once aging out of foster care. TRAC's matrix consists of five domains, which are education, employability, employment, financial literacy, and shelter. Using this matrix, a measurement scale was developed for this study to generate an

overall score of self-sufficiency, which was used as the criterion variable. The expected result was that youth with more stability while in care would have higher scores on the self-sufficiency scale.

Original TRAC Research Design

Agency Evaluation

TRAC approached the Center for Child Welfare at the University of Texas at Arlington in February of 2009 to conduct an outcome study of youth receiving TRAC services. The evaluation project began in July of 2009, and data from CPS were received in May of 2010. The final report was submitted to TRAC on September 30, 2010.

Agency Profile

TRAC opened its doors in 2003 and has served over 3,000 foster youth ages 14 to 24 years. TRAC operates as a program of City Square Dallas, formerly Central Dallas Ministries, a non-profit organization. TRAC is the North Texas regional transition center for youth aging out of foster care and provides services for youth in need of affordable housing, livable-wage jobs, assistance with education, linkage with medical and mental health care, and also provides an overall safety net for youth transitioning out of foster care. Additionally, TRAC offers skill-building classes and supports which provide youth the necessary skills to live independently. These supports include emergency shelter, transitional living, and permanent supportive housing; money management classes and coaching; Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) life skills training; employment coaching and referrals; emergency assistance; and case management. TRAC's main office is in Dallas, Texas with satellite locations in nearby Grand Prairie and Fort Worth for supporting staff. Services are offered in Dallas, Tarrant, and the 17 surrounding counties of North Texas.

Study Population

Evaluation eligibility. To determine which TRAC clients to include in the 2009 study, only those youth who were both former foster youth and had received at least 10 hours of Case Management services through TRAC between September 1, 2005 and August 31, 2009 were included. This eliminated youth for whom TRAC received a referral but the youth did not receive services.

TRAC database sample. The 2009 TRAC database contains 329 cases. Approximately 169 youth (51.4%) received TRAC services before they transitioned out of care (ILS youth), and 160 youth (48.7%) began TRAC services after they left substitute care. The database includes 36 youth (10.9%) as only receiving TRAC services before they transitioned out of care, 133 youth (40.4%) as receiving both in-care and after care services, and 160 (48.6%) as receiving TRAC services once they left substitute care for a sample size of 329.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Research Question

The purpose of the current study was to explore what exosystem and macrosystem supports and services provided to youth in care most promote or inhibit youth's overall self-sufficiency once they leave care. Therefore, the overall research question was: What are the supports and services youth receive in CPS custody that either promote or inhibit youth's success after leaving care?

Hypothesis

The working hypothesis is: Youth who have fewer caseworkers, fewer placements, a shorter stay in foster care, type of placement, and receive independent living services will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more caseworkers, more placements, a longer stay in foster care, more restrictive placements,

and do not receive independent living services. Because this study was conducted to determine the effect of systemic factors associated with foster care on youth, variables associated with the individual youth were used as control variables. These control variables were age, race, ethnicity, gender, age removed from biological home, type of abuse, and level of education at the time of transitioning out of foster care.

Hypotheses 1: Youth who have fewer caseworkers will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more caseworkers.

Hypothesis 2: Youth who have fewer placements will have a higher on the self-sufficiency score than those who have more placements.

Hypothesis 3: Youth who have a shorter stay in foster care will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who are in foster care longer.

Hypothesis 4: Youth who have less restrictive placements will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more restrictive placements.

Hypothesis 5: Youth who have fewer case workers, fewer placements, shorter stay in foster care, less restrictive placements, and receive independent living services will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more case workers, more placements, longer stays in foster care, more restrictive placements and do not receive independent living services.

Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from the database used for the previously discussed 2009 TRAC evaluation. The population for the previous study included youth who had transitioned out of Foster Care and received a minimum of 10 hours of TRAC case management services between September 1, 2005 and August 31, 2009, but not youth for whom TRAC received a referral and did not receive actual services. The starting population in the database consisted of 329 youth. From this population, a

sample was purposefully derived based on those cases of youth with complete and known outcome data. Of the original 329 cases, 219 cases included complete and known data. Based on Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), an adequate sample size needs to be greater than 146; thus the resulting sample of 219 cases will be sufficient statistically (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). With an effect size estimated at 0.3, the sample size was 219, alpha = .05, g-power power said my statistical power to be .99; also demonstrating a sample size of 219 is adequate.

A chi-square was employed to determine if there was a significant difference between youth who were dropped from the study and those that were retained; youth were compared by gender, race, and ethnicity. Chi-square results determined there was not a statistically significant difference between gender X^2 (1, N = 329) = 0.44, p = 0.506, race X^2 (5, N = 329) = .86, p = .973, or ethnicity X^2 (2, N = 329) = 3.89, p = .143 of those who were retained and those who were dropped from the analysis.

In addition, an independent samples t-test was utilized to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between those who were dropped and those who were retained for the variable age at removal. The results demonstrate that there was not a statistically significant difference in the age at removal for those you who were dropped (M = 12.49, SD = 3.15) and those who were retained (M = 12.45, SD = 3.24); t (327) = 0.12, p = .747.

Data Collection

The collection of data involved managing the 2009 TRAC database to derive the necessary sample for conducting this study. The data included records derived from the TRAC and Children's Protective Services (CPS) databases. These records contained demographic information such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and last grade completed.

Other variables were removal date, reason(s) for removal, age at exit from care, number of placements, number of workers, and TRAC's Self-Sufficiency Matrix.

Variables

Criterion Variable: Self-Sufficiency Scale

The criterion variable was the Self-Sufficiency Scale Score. I developed the scale prior to conducting the statistical analysis for the full study. The development of this scale consisted of a three-step process. First, I conducted a frequency analysis to determine the level of missing or unknown (0) outcome data. Second, the scale was recoded to a 0 to 4 scale with 0 representing the least self-sufficiency and 4 the most self-sufficiency (see Table 4-1). Finally, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to verify that the factors fit on one factor.

Frequency analyses were conducted to determine the level of missing and/or unknown data. Data were considered missing if the response was blank and unknown if the response was marked as a zero (0). For the purposes of statistical analysis, both of these categories were treated as missing data. The results demonstrated a large percentage of missing or unknown (0) data. No firm rules are in place regarding how to address missing data (Mertler & Vannatta, 2005, Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). As shown in Table 4-2, missing or unknown outcome data ranged from a low of 21% (n = 69) in Education to a high of 29.2% (n = 96) in Financial Literacy. A total of 110 participants had either missing or unknown (0) data and were removed from the sample. The final sample size was 219.

Second, the TRAC Self-Sufficiency Scale was recoded. All scores labeled 0 in the original scale were dropped from the sample. Those scores labeled a 1 became 0, those labeled as 2 became 1, those labeled as 3 became 2, those labeled as 4 became 3, and those labeled as 5 became 4 as seen in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1 Self-Sufficiency Scale

	0	1	2	3	4
Education	Out of school without high school diploma or GED	Enrolled in a program to obtain high school diploma or GED	Has high school diploma or GED	Enrolled in college or vocational training program	Successfully attending and maintaining college or vocational training program
Employability	Lack of needed skills related to obtain/ maintain job placement	Actively participated in training or coaching related to obtaining/ maintaining a job	Has learned skills related to applying to jobs, filling needed paperwork, interviewing successfully, and maintaining work relationships	Has demonstrated skills related to job readiness and has shown motivation to become employed	Has demonstrated they are appropriately motivated and actively seeking employment
Employment	Unemployed	Temporary, part-time, or seasonal employment	Employed full-time	Employed full-time with adequate pay and benefits	Consistently employed full-time for six or more months
Financial Literacy	Lack of skills/ understanding of basic money management	Basic understanding of money management and budget; not using a budget	Budget developed but poorly managed	Budget utilized and balanced	Budget utilized effectively and includes a savings program
Shelter	Homeless	Temporary, substandard housing, or threatened with eviction	In stable housing that is safe but marginally adequate	Housing is safe and adequate	Consistently in safe, adequate housing for six or more months

Table 4-2 TRAC's Self-Sufficiency Matrix Missing and Unknown Data

	Missing (%)	Unknown (%)	Total (%)
Education	41 (12.5)	28 (8.5)	69 (21.0)
Employability	41 (12.5)	48 (14.6)	89 (27.1)
Employment	41 (12.5)	39 (11.9)	80 (24.4)
Shelter	41 (12.5)	37 (11.2)	78 (23.7)
Financial Literacy	41 (12.5)	55 (16.7)	96 (29.2)

Finally, a confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine that self-sufficiency was the only dimension of the scale. As listed in the matrix, each variable in the scale was ordinal and measured by the rank of 0 to 4. Because the results of the factor analysis indicated that the factors fit on one factor, the solution could not be rotated. See Table 4-3 for the factor analysis results.

Table 4-3 Factor Analysis of the Self-Sufficiency Matrix

Component	Component Loading	Total	% Variance Explained	Cumulative % of Variance
Employment	.685	2.836	56.73	56.73
Shelter	.703	.858	17.15	73.88
Employability	.828	.551	11.01	84.89
Financial Literacy	.854	.129	8.57	93.467
Education	.676	.327	6.53	100.00

Note. Eigenvalue for the scale was 2.836.

Predictor Variables

A number of predictor variables were used to test their affect on youth's self-sufficiency. These variables were: (a) number of caseworkers, (b) number of placements, (c) length of time in foster care, and (d) level of care. The level of care variable was provided as the following categories of care: basic foster care, juvenile detention, agency therapeutic foster home, etc. Guided by the literature and with the assistance of a Child Protective Services Supervisor II, each of the categories was ranked and recoded as low restriction (1), medium restriction (2), or high restriction (3). Low restriction included basic foster care, kinship care, adoptive placement, etc. Medium restriction included agency therapeutic group home or emergency shelter. Juvenile detention, hospital, and residential treatment were highly restricted placements.

Control Variables

Individual factors will be controlled for statistically in an effort to isolate systemic factors that impact youth's self-sufficiency. The control variables were the following: (a) age as of August 31, 2009, (b) race, (c) gender, (d) education, (e) type(s) of abuse, and (f) age at removal from home. All of these variables except the age related variables were nominal.

Reliability and Validity of Measurement Instruments

Reliability. Reliability of measures is "a matter of whether a particular technique, applied repeatedly to the same object, would yield the same result each time" (Rubin & Babbie, 2008, p. 194). To assess internal consistency reliability of the Self-Sufficiency Scale, I used Cronbach's alpha (α) and Split-Half Reliability. The Chronbach's alpha was .801, suggesting the internal reliability of the measure to be good. Additionally, examining the split-half reliability, the Spearman-Brown Coefficient for equal length was .804 and for

unequal length was .809, also indicating the internal reliability of the self-sufficiency scale to be good (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2008; Rubin & Babbie, 2011).

Validity. The validity of the Self-Sufficiency Scale was examined for content and factorial validity. Content validity "refers to the degree to which a measure covers the range of meanings included with the concept" (Rubin & Babbie, 2011, p. 200). The Self-Sufficiency Scale encompasses five key aspects of self-sufficiency: (a) education, (b) employability, (c) employment, (d) financial literacy, and (e) shelter. The education dimension examines the range of education possibilities from not attending school and does not have a GED to currently enrolled in either college or a vocational training program. Employability refers to having the skills necessary to obtain and maintain employment. This scale ranges from lacking the necessary skills for obtaining employment to being motivated and currently seeking employment with a resume, the necessary paperwork to apply for a job, adequate interviewing skills, and the ability to maintain work relationships. Employment ranges from being unemployed to maintaining full-time work for six or more months. Financial literacy refers to the level of understanding the participant has about basic money management and budgeting and ranges from lacking the understanding and/or skills to effectively manage money to using a budget and saving money. The final dimension is Shelter. The shelter domain includes being homeless to having safe and adequate housing for six or more months. Based on the literature review, these five dimensions adequately describe self-sufficiency.

Factorial validity is determined through the statistical procedure factor analysis. The Self-Sufficiency Scale was developed to be unidimensional; in other words, to only measure self-sufficiency. The factor analysis reported above confirmed that the scale is unidimensional. Although the literature suggests that factorial validity is similar to

construct validity, further study of the scale is necessary to determine if it corresponds or not to other scales of self-sufficiency (Rubin & Babbie, 2011; Stapleton, 1997).

Data Analysis

To identify the supports and services youth receive in CPS custody that either promote or inhibit youth's success after leaving care, multiple regression was employed for each of the five hypotheses. As discussed above, control variables were employed to identify the systemic factors most likely to contribute to youths' self-sufficiency. In addition, descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample.

Chapter 5

Results

The goal of this study was to explore the various exosystem and macrosystem supports and services provided to youth in care that most promote or inhibit youth's overall self-sufficiency once they leave care. Controlling for individual factors (age as of August 31, 2009, race, gender, education, type(s) of abuse, and age at removal from home), this study isolated the specific systemic factors of CPS care (number of case workers, number of placements, length of time in foster care, type of placement while in care, and receipt of independent living services) that affected youth's self-sufficiency once transitioned out of care. The variable receipt of independent living services was omitted due to having no variability. Each person receiving TRAC services, a requirement to being included in the study, by default received independent living services. Due to using secondary data, it was not possible to identify when clients received independent living services, either before they attended TRAC or once they were TRAC clients, only that all subjects received independent living services once they were TRAC clients.

This chapter will first report the characteristics of the sample population; demographics of the sample and the reason(s) they were in care will be presented. Then, the results of the statistical analysis will be reported. The Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS 18.0) was used in the data analysis.

Description of the Study Participants

Descriptive statistics are used in this section to provide data on the sample population. Descriptive data describes the characteristics of this sample including gender, race, ethnicity, age at removal from home, age as of August 31, 2009, and age at exit from care. In addition, the reasons youth were removed from their home and the highest

grade level achieved are presented. Finally, a comparison between study participants and Texas's foster care population is discussed.

Descriptive Data

A total of 219 youth were included in the study. The sample contained 94 (42.9%) males and 125 (57.1%) females (Table 5-1). Of the 219 study participants, the majority was either Caucasian (*n* = 101, 46.1%) or African American (*n* = 107, 48.9%).

Table 5-1 Race and Ethnicity

	n	%
Race		
Caucasian	101	46.1
African American	107	48.9
Asian	2	0.9
Mixed Race	6	2.7
American Indian/ Pacific Islander	2	0.9
Unknown	1	0.5
Ethnicity		
Not Hispanic	191	87.2
Hispanic	26	11.9
Unable to determine	2	0.9

The average age youth were removed from their home was 12.45 years, and almost 60% of the sample (n = 129, 58.9%) was removed from home after age 11 (Table 5-2). The average age of sample youth as of August 31, 2009 was 19.47 years old with ages ranging from a low of 16 to a high of 25 years of age. The majority of youth's (*n* = 200, 91.3%) most recent exit from care occurred when they were 18 years old.

Table 5-2 Age as of August 31, 2009, Age of Removal, and Age at Most Recent Exit

	Age at Removal from Home	Age as of August 31, 2009	Age at Most Recent Exit
M	12.45	19.47	17.91
Mdn	13.00	19.00	18.00
Mode	13	18[a]	18
Skewness	-1.043	0.496	-3.34
Kurtosis	0.756	-0.352	11.03
Variance	10.51	3.30	0.093
SD	3.24	1.81	0.304

Note. [a] indicates multiple modes exist, the lowest mode is shown.

Youth were removed from home for myriad reasons (see Table 5-3). The most common reason for removal was neglectful supervision/risk (*n* = 87, 39.7%), followed by refusal to assume parental responsibility (*n* = 73, 33.3%), and physical abuse/risk (*n* = 55, 25.1%). Most youth were removed for one primary reason (*n* = 128, 58.4%), although 54 youth (24.7%) were removed for two reasons, and 37 youth (16.9%) were removed for three or more reasons.

Youth also varied in the level of education completed as seen in Table 5-4. Although over 30% either completed 12th grade or obtained a GED (*n* = 68, 31.1%), 3.7% (*n* = 8) earned an eighth grade education or less.

Table 5-3 Reason for Removal*

	n	%
Abandonment	40	18.3
Caretaker death	1	0.5
Emotional abuse/risk	20	9.1
Medical neglect/risk	13	5.9
Neglectful supervision/risk	87	39.7
Physical abuse/risk	55	25.1
Physical neglect/risk	35	16
Refusal to assume parental responsibility	73	33.3
Sexual abuse/risk	34	15.5

Note. * indicates total reasons for removal will not equal 100; many youth were removed for more than one reason.

Table 5-4 Highest Grade Completed

Highest Grade Completed	*n*	%
4	1	0.5
6	1	0.5
7	1	0.5
8	5	2.3
9	30	13.7
10	48	21.9
11	64	29.2
12	61	27.9
GED	7	3.2

Comparison of Study Participants and Texas's Foster Care Population

Although primary focus of this study was to examine the exosystem and macrosystem factors of CPS care that either promote or inhibit self-sufficiency of youth transitioning out of care, it is important to examine who participated in the study and determine if they are representative of overall picture of Texas's foster care youth. This sample diverged from the typical picture of a Texas foster care youth in the DFPS 2011 Data Book (Texas Department of Family & Protective Services, 2012). Study youth were primarily female (57.1%), while the majority of foster care youth in Texas are male (54.2%). In addition, racially, Texas' foster care children are fairly evenly split among Caucasian (29.4%), African American (30.3%), and Hispanic (38.1%). The racial divide in this study is primarily between Caucasian (46.1%) and African American (48.9%). Ethnicity was addressed separately, yet only 11.9% (*n* = 26) of the participants identified as Hispanic.

Analysis of Data Related to the Research Question and Hypothesis

This section presents the findings related to the overarching research question and each individual hypothesis. Each hypothesis is restated and the findings are presented. Control variables were used to help isolate the specific components of care received while in CPS custody that either promote or inhibit self-sufficiency once youth transitions out of state care. The control variables used were: (a) age as of August 31, 2009, (b) age removed from home, (c) gender, (d) race, and (e) type(s) of abuse that precipitated the removal from their home. Because of multicollinearity the control variable age removed from home was dropped from the analysis of hypothesis 3, youth who have a shorter stay in foster care will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who are in foster care longer.

Hypothesis 1

H_1: Youth who have fewer caseworkers will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more caseworkers.

H_0: Youth who have fewer caseworkers will not have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more caseworkers.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-sufficiency and total number of caseworkers a youth has while in care. Regression results in Table 5-5 indicate that the number of caseworkers does not predict overall self-sufficiency when age as of August 31, 2009, race, gender, education, type(s) of abuse, and age at removal from home are held constant.

Table 5-5 Coefficients for Number of Caseworkers

	B	β	*t*	*p*	R^2	*F*
# of Caseworkers	-0.163	-0.128	-1.768	0.079	0.229	3.724

Although the regression model did not predict overall self-sufficiency, there was a statically significant negative correlation (r = -0.159, p = 0.009) between the number of caseworkers and overall self-sufficiency. See Appendix. This suggests that the more caseworkers youth have, the lower their overall self-sufficiency. Therefore there is a relationship between the number of caseworkers a youth has and overall self-sufficiency, even if the regression model does not reach statistical significance; therefore, the null hypothesis is retained.

Hypothesis 2

H_2: Youth who have fewer placements will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more placements.

H_0: You who have fewer placements will not have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more placements.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-sufficiency and total number of placements a youth has while in care. Regression results in Table 5-6 indicate that the number of placements predicts overall self-sufficiency when age as of August 31, 2009, race, gender, education, type(s) of abuse, and age at removal from home are held constant. This model accounts for 25.8% of the variance in self-sufficiency scores.

Table 5-6 Coefficients for Number of Placements

	B	β	*t*	*p*	R^2	*F*
# of Placements	-0.159	-0.209	-2.821	0.005	0.258	4.094

In addition, there was a statically significant negative correlation (r = -0.228, p = 0.000) between the number of caseworkers and overall self-sufficiency. See Appendix. This suggests that the more placements youth have, the lower their overall self-sufficiency, supporting the regression model findings; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 3

H_3: Youth who have a shorter stay in foster care will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who are in foster care longer.

H_0: Youth who have a shorter stay in foster care will not have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who are in foster care longer.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-sufficiency and length of time in care. Regression results in Table 5-7

indicate that the amount of time in foster care does not predict overall self-sufficiency when age as of August 31, 2009, race, gender, education, type(s) of abuse, and age at removal from home are held constant.

Table 5-7 Coefficients for Length of Time in Care

	B	β	*t*	*p*	R^2	*F*
Time in Foster Care	-0.163	-0.128	-1.768	0.079	0.229	3.724

The correlation matrix further supports the regression model findings. See Appendix. The correlation matrix did not find a statically significant relationship between the length of time youth spends in foster care and their total level of self-sufficiency upon leaving care (r = 0.100, p = 0.071); therefore the null hypothesis is retained.

Hypothesis 4

H_4: Youth who have less restrictive placements will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more restrictive placements.

H_0: Youth who have less restrictive placements will not have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more restrictive placements.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-sufficiency and the level of care in which a youth resides while in care. Regression results in Table 5-8 indicate that the level of care predicts overall self-sufficiency when age as of August 31, 2009, race, gender, education, type(s) of abuse, and age at removal from home are held constant. This model accounts for 25.6% of the variance in self-sufficiency scores.

Table 5-8 Coefficients for Level of Care

	B	β	*t*	*p*	R^2	*F*
Level of Care	-0.1872	-0.177	-2.717	0.007	0.256	4.050

In addition, there was a statically significant negative correlation (r = -0.148, p = 0.014) between the number of caseworkers and overall self-sufficiency. See Appendix. This suggests that the more restrictive the placement in which they reside, the lower their overall self-sufficiency, supporting the regression model findings; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 5

H_5: Youth who have fewer case workers, fewer placements, shorter stay in foster care, and less restrictive placements will have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more case workers, more placements, longer stays in foster care, and more restrictive placements.

H_0: Youth who have fewer case workers, fewer placements, shorter stay in foster care, and less restrictive placements will not have a higher self-sufficiency score than those who have more case workers, more placements, longer stays in foster care, and more restrictive placements.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-sufficiency and the predictor variables, (a) fewer caseworkers, (b) fewer placements, (c) shorter stay in foster care, and (d) less restrictive placements. Regression results in Table 5-9 indicate that the predictor variables do not predict overall self-sufficiency when age as of August 31, 2009, race, gender, education, type(s) of abuse, and age at removal from home are held constant.

Table 5-9 Coefficients for Full Model

	B	β	*t*	*p*
# of Caseworkers	-0.044	-0.031	-0.450	0.654
# of Placements	-0.118	-0.155	-1.954	0.052
Time in Foster Care	1.896	1.487	1.841	0.067
Level of Care	-1.304	-0.122	-1.769	0.078

Note. R^2 = .269.

Although the regression model did not predict overall self-sufficiency, there was a statistically significant correlation between three of the four predictor variables when age as of August 31, 2009, race, gender, education, type(s) of abuse, and age at removal from home are held constant. The number of caseworkers (r = -0.148, p = 0.010), the number of placements (r = -0.228, p = 0.000), and the level of care (r = -0.148, p = 0.014) were all negatively correlated with overall self-sufficiency scores. This suggests there is a relationship between additional caseworkers, more placements, and more restrictive levels of care and overall self-sufficiency, even if the regression model does not reach statistical significance; therefore, the null hypothesis is retained.

Chapter 6

Discussion

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the exosystem and macrosystem supports and services provided to youth in state foster care that either promote or inhibit youth's self-sufficiency once they transition from care. Using five domains of self-sufficiency: (a) education, (b) employability, (c) employment, (d) financial literacy, and (e) shelter. An examination was made of the components of state care: (a) number of caseworkers, (b) number of placements, (c) length of time in foster care, and (d) level of restriction in placements while in care and how they either inhibit or promote self-sufficiency. The data used for this analysis originated from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Children's Protective Services and the Transitional Resource Action Center. Although the literature includes examinations of each of these components of care as part of other studies, there is a gap in the literature that systematically isolates these components of care to examine how they influence foster youth's self-sufficiency.

The remainder of this chapter will be used to examine the findings through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's System Ecological Theory and to use an additional theory, Arnett's Emerging Adult's developmental theory, to further examine the findings. Bronfenbrenner's System Ecological Theory was insufficient due to the developmental aspects of this population; therefore, Arnett's (2004) Emerging Adults developmental lens will be used.

Summary of Findings

Regression Findings

Only two of the predictor variables, number of placements and level of care, when analyzed independently, predicted higher self-sufficiency scores. Furthermore,

when all four predictor variables, number of workers, number of placements, time in care, and level of care, were included in the final regression model, none were statistically significant. However, three of the four variables, number of caseworkers, number of placements, and level of care approached significance ($p = 0.654$, $p = 0.052$, and $p = 0.067$, respectively). The final regression model indicated that only 26.9% of the variance was explained by the predictor variables when controlling for personal characteristics. This suggests factors other than the predicted variables influenced overall self-sufficiency in former foster youth.

Correlation Findings

Whereas the regression findings did not demonstrate statistical significance, three of the four predictor variables had statistically significant correlations. When run independently and as part of the whole regression model, number of caseworkers, number of placements, and level of care were all negatively correlated with self-sufficiency scores; only time in care did not indicate a relationship. A relationship did occur respectively between additional caseworkers, more placements, increasingly restrictive placements, and decreased self-sufficiency.

Discussion of the Findings

Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to the study of foster youths' self-sufficiency provided a necessary framework for studying the multiple aspects of youths' journeys after leaving the foster care system. Specifically, it was useful for examining the systemic components of care that might promote or inhibit overall self-sufficiency following foster care. Therefore, the findings were unexpected.

As discussed in the literature review, each of the studied variables has been shown to negatively affect overall outcomes for former foster youth. Caseworker stability has been demonstrated to impact placement stability, permanency and trust (Annie E.

Casey Foundation, 2003; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Placement stability has been shown to improve mental and physical health and academic achievement (Newton et al., 2000; Rubin et al., 2004; Schelble, Franks, & Miller, 2010; Strijker et al., 2008; Zetlin et al., 2006; Zima et al., 2000). Additionally, youth with fewer placements have lower rates of homelessness, better outcomes for employment, lower rates of substance abuse, and less involvement with the law (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler et al., 2009; McMillen et al., 2003; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Ryan et al., 2007). Less time spent in foster care loosely associates with more positive outcomes (Kerman et al., 2002). Finally, the type of placement has been shown to influence self-sufficiency of youth once they leave care (Kids Count, 2011; Zuravin et al., 1999). Based on the current study's findings, these variables only describe a portion of the factors that influence self-sufficiency.

Perhaps, developmental factors affect youths' positive outcome likelihood. Erikson identified many factors of development during the teen years that revolve around identity and repudiation vs. identity diffusion. Identity exploration requires spending time figuring out who they are, who they want to be, what they enjoy, and with whom they belong. During this period, youth focus on peer groups and out groups. They do this through membership in outside activities, such as groups, sports, religion, community service, etc. (Miller, 2002).

For many youth in foster care, the instability of their living situations can negatively affect their ability to form lasting bonds, explore who they are, and discover their true selves. Foster youth experience difficulty in developing the ties necessary to foster relationships and bonds because of the inherent instability of their lives. Many move often, change schools frequently, and miss school between moves due to lost or delayed records. The people they live with change with each move and they must adapt

to each new family's rules and structures. Additionally, the expected constant, their caseworker, often changes. The only constant is change.

Foster youth, unlike youth of stable families, are more focused on basic survival and may not have the time or the energy to spend time on identity formation. While they may want educations and careers, they may have to settle for jobs to simply pay the bills. Unable to achieve the ties that form through stability, group membership, friendships, and family, they often have difficulty integrating their identities and develop identity diffusion (Erikson, 1968).

After the identity stage, intimacy and solidarity vs. isolation occurs in young adulthood. At this stage young adults begin to form more lasting relationships with friends and lovers and become more cooperative in their relationships. Yet progressing through the intimacy stage of development requires the successful completion of the pervious stage, the formation of an identity. Only if a "reasonably well-integrated identity emerges from stage 5 can psychological intimacy with other people (or even oneself) be possible" (Miller, 2002, p.155).

I posit that many foster youth enter young adulthood at a disadvantage. They have not successfully navigated the previous stage by forming an identity. They also have been unable to identify exactly who they are, what they believe, and what they are passionate about.

Similarly, Arnett proposed the insertion of a new stage between Erikson's identity and repudiation vs. identity diffusion and its subsequent stage of intimacy and solidarity vs. isolation. Arnett postulated that instability affects the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). As evidenced by reports of high rates of homelessness and reliance on income assistance through welfare and food stamps among former foster youth, these emerging adults must become self-sufficient before

many of their peers. They, however, lack the necessary skills for self-sufficiency because not only have they experienced excessive placement instability, their personal freedoms are restricted in the name of safety.

In foster care, policies are in place to keep youth safe, such as requiring background checks before spending the night out at the home of a youth friend afford little opportunity for foster youth to explore relationships outside of foster care. Because foster youth are restricted socially, their friends and friends' parents are given a level of scrutiny that many youth do not normally experience while developing skills necessary for independent living. Many of today's youth have the advantage of relying on family to help assist with the transition to adulthood, foster youth do not have that luxury.

According to Arnett, many youth from stable families use the transition from adolescent to adulthood as a time to learn to take care of themselves while they have yet to take on all adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2004). They learn to make decisions about going to school or work and with whom they spend time or enter "committed, long-term relationships" surrounded by family who form a safety net. Also, the non-foster youth tend to demonstrate responsible sexual behavior and are less likely to have children outside of long-term relationships. On the other hand, many foster youth have children within four years of leaving care, are focused on survival, and do not have the luxury of deciding whether or not to go to work (Scannapieco et al., 2007; Pecora et al., 2003). These former foster youth cannot afford to lose their jobs and lack a support network to help them through tough economic times. In addition, their lower levels of primary education, as evidenced in this study, decrease their chances for completing secondary education, let alone entering postsecondary education.

While still in care, many foster youth still believe they can do anything, experience feelings of limitless possibilities, and believe they can go to college, even

when they are failing high school (Reilly, 2003). A gap in the literature exists and is extensive regarding these emerging adults' experiences following foster care separation.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, secondary data were used, and the validity and accuracy of the data could not be verified. Secondary data do not necessarily mean poor data; rather, the data set was incomplete. Because the data were secondary and many cases were missing and/or contained incomplete data, over 100 participants were dropped from the analysis. Although independent samples *t* test and chi-square results did not find a statistically significant difference between youth who were dropped and those who were retained on the variables of gender, ethnicity, and age removed from home, it cannot be said with certainty that no differences nor any disparities affected the results.

Another limitation was the failure of the sample to match the overall Texas' foster care system population. The sample had proportionally more females and fewer Hispanics than the overall system according to the DFPS 2011 Data Book (2012). This may be because the Data Book provides data on all youth and does not provide discrete demographic data on youth who have aged out of the foster care system. It is unknown how this study's sample matched the overall population of youth aging out of care.

Additionally, scale may not reflect the nuances of the variables that made up self-sufficiency. Because the scale was made from a range of subjective outcomes, it is possible that the scale did not adequately reflect each of the dimensions of self-sufficiency. Furthermore, although the reliability of the overall scale was good, level of training staff received and the inter-rater reliability for scoring by staff are unknown. This could also negatively the reliability of the final instrument.

Finally, this sample was limited by the voluntary nature of TRAC services. The characteristics of those who do not chose to use TRAC services remains unknown. All that can be said is that the picture of youth aging out of foster care is incomplete. This sample was also drawn from a specific population residing in North Texas; thus, the findings are not generalizable.

Policy Implications

At a national level, assisting youth transitioning out of foster care has garnered support. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, 1999 (P.L. 106-169) offers grants to states to provide educational, employment and financial support to youth until they are 21 to promote self-sufficiency in youth transitioning out of care. In addition, there are funds available to expand Medicaid to former foster youth ages 18 to 21 years (Fernandez, 2006; Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, Child Welfare Information Gateway).

Texas provides funds to youth if they are enrolled in high school or a GED program until they turn 22 years old. Foster youth in Texas may also receive funds between 18 and 21 years old if they attend college, a vocational school, or employment training; if they are employed; or if they are unable to do any of the above because of a documented disability or medical reason (Pergamit, McDaniel, & Hawkins, 2012). Even though these supports may be available and funded, many youth either do not know about them or chose not to take advantage of them. Providing funding for housing is important, but it is also necessary to provide the skills necessary for youth to maintain independence after their 21st birthday (Pergamit, McDaniel, & Hawkins, 2012).

Although youth are eligible to remain in care until 21 years of age if they are in college or in a trade school or until 22 years of age if they are still in high school, many youth chose to leave care prematurely or at 18 years of age in order to be independent.

Providing a continuum of care that allows youth to receive supports and services that assist in the transition to self-sufficiency while gradually allowing youth to become more independent is critical. To facilitate this continuum of care requires creating, funding, and promoting a program with specific units and professionals specially trained to work with emerging adults.

Another recommendation involves providing independent living services that mimic actual independent living. Halfway houses or specially designated apartment complexes could house youths as they transition out of care. After they leave this living situation, youth could benefit through support services that mentor and empower youth as they gain the skills necessary for full self-sufficiency. Critical for ensuring youth use this continuum of services is proper funding, promotion, and governance.

Practice Implications

At an exosystem or macrosystem level, an ideological shift away from permanency for youth who appear to be heading for aging out of foster care to a focus on independent living skills and supports is needed. While permanence is ideal, it is unrealistic to think every child will find a permanent home. Creating a program for these youth through a move into a semi-independent living situation with active and structured supports and services would benefit youth once they age out of state care completely (Courtney et al., 2001; Cushing, 2011; Tweedle, 2007). A continuum of services could be instituted for youth to learn the skills necessary to be self-sufficient would benefit this population. Youth could be taught budgeting; holding down stable employment; finishing school or obtaining a GED; attending a postsecondary institution; and the basic homemaking skills for doing laundry, cleaning, planning meals, and cooking. Additionally, such a program could entice some youth to remain in care longer because of receiving

the support and guidance needed for successfully transitioning out of care and become self-sufficient.

In addition, a more diligent attempt to allow youth to remain in longer-term stable placements, rather than undergoing multiple moves, would be helpful. If youth must move, arrangements for them to remain within the same school as the previous placement should be made for them to continue to participate in extracurricular activities, keep the same peer groups, and avoid academic disruption. Efforts by their caseworkers to maintain some semblance of stability could facilitate the feeling of continuity even through multiple moves between various foster homes (Rubin et al., 2004; Schelble, Franks, & Miller, 2010; Strijker et al., 2008; Zima et al., 2000).

Longer-term stability for youth could be facilitated by providing more intensive training and support services to foster parents. Additional home-based training and services may be beneficial to maintaining stable placements (Collins, Jordan & Coleman, 2010; Foster, Prinz, & O'Leary, 1983, Woods, 1988). Delivering home-based services to youth and their foster families may benefit youth as takes place with their natural environment. Also, providing home-based treatment allows for immediate feedback and application within the environment and overcomes many of the roadblocks of therapy, such as lack of transportation, reluctant family members, and engaging the entire family in the setting within which they are most comfortable (Tracy, 1991; Woods, 1988). Lastly, in-home services provide an avenue to address any crisis that may arise within the home (Kelley, Yorker, Whitley, & Sipe, 2001; Collins et al., 2010).

Research Recommendations

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) provides a national sample of former youth and a more complete understanding of the issues foster youth faced during care and once they attained independence (USHHS, 2012). Although the NYTD offers a

step in the right direction toward tracking, it is not sufficient. The NYTD only provides three data points, at ages 17 (baseline), 19, and 21. At 21 years old, youth might have just transitioned out of foster care, thus the system fails to enable workers to track youth into emerging or young adulthood sufficiently to discern their self-sufficiency and levels of post foster care success. Although there are longitudinal studies involving tracking former foster youth, these studies are limited by both geography and program-type. Additional longitudinal studies are necessary to explore the ecological and developmental factors that influence self-sufficiency in foster youth during the transition from care to independence and the emergence of adulthood.

Further investigation using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, Erikson's theory of development, and Arnett's emerging adult developmental theory would be informative. Combining the three theories would provide a beneficial framework for the examination of micro, meso, and exosystem factors impacting foster youths' self-sufficiency.

Youths' beliefs may need exploration in order to better ascertain their post-foster care outcomes. Research that incorporates both quantitative and phenomenological qualitative component and is purposively sampled would provide both standardized scores and the rich data exemplified by phenomenology. A longitudinal study is needed that incorporates both methodologies to track changes in youths' beliefs about their identities, current realities, and futures.

Furthermore, using Erikson's young adulthood and Arnett's emerging adults as a framework to examine foster youths' beliefs about family of origin and former families could provide insight into how foster youth develop identity and build self. Such study could be used to investigate the possibility of a subculture of foster youth that has yet to be defined.

Finally, further study comparing foster youth and vulnerable youth is necessary. Such study may allow for understanding more fully how foster youth fare as adults compared typical youth and other vulnerable youth populations. Utilizing current national research data sets such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to match and compare typical youth, former foster youth, and vulnerable youth over time may valuable information.

Appendix A

Correlation Matrix

	SSscale	Gender	Race Recode	Highest grade completed	Age as of Aug. 31, 2009	Abandonment	Emotional abuse/ risk	Medical neglect/ risk
SSscale	1.000	.155*	.000	.031	.373**	.082	.046	.045
Gender	.155*	1.000	.025	.021	.098	-.022	.113*	-.057
Race Recode	.000	.025	1.000	-.058	-.079	.032	.082	.015
Highest grade completed	.031	.021	-.058	1.000	.004	-.053	.118*	.093
Age as of August 31, 2009	.373**	.098	-.079	.004	1.000	-.017	.006	.000
Abandonment	.082	-.022	.032	-.053	-.017	1.000	-.151*	-.019
Emotional abuse/risk	.046	.113*	.082	.118*	.006	-.151*	1.000	.054
Medical neglect/risk	.045	-.057	.015	.093	.000	-.019	.054	1.000
Refusal to assume parental responsibility	-.071	-.144*	.105	-.043	.036	-.031	-.088	-.053
Neglectful supervision/risk	-.016	.116*	.140*	-.104	-.038	-.023	.033	-.007
Physical Abuse/Risk	-.063	.022	.042	.045	.023	-.190**	.296**	.125*
Physical neglect/risk	-.027	-.027	.054	.039	-.043	-.143*	.034	.154*
Sexual Abuse/Risk	.086	.243**	.049	-.010	-.061	-.171**	.082	-.055
Care taker death contributes to removal	.108	-.079	-.056	-.031	-.017	-.032	-.022	-.017
Age at removal	.112*	.162**	-.008	.077	.033	-.038	.016	-.124*
Average Level of Care	-.148*	-.104	-.091	-.037	.125**	-.063	-.053	.193**
Number of years in CPS care	-.100	-.154*	.001	-.074	-.007	.048	-.022	.124*
# of placements	-.228**	-.047	.050	.001	-.027	-.063	-.029	.145*
# of workers	-.159**	-.046	-.077	.016	-.265**	-.005	.048	.013

	Neglectful supervision/ risk	Physical Abuse/Risk	Physical neglect/risk	Sexual Abuse/Risk	Care taker death contributes to removal	Age at removal	Refusal to assume parental responsibility
SSscale	-.016	-.063	-.027	.086	.108	.112*	-.071
Gender	.116	.022	-.027	.243**	-.079	.162**	-.144*
Race Recode	.140*	.042	.054	.049	-.056	-.008	.105
Highest grade completed	-.104	.045	.039	-.010	-.031	.077	-.043
Age as of August 31, 2009	-.038	.023	-.043	-.061	-.017	.033	.036
Abandonment	-.023	-.190**	-.143*	-.171**	-.032	-.038	-.031
Emotional abuse/risk	.033	.296**	.034	.082	-.022	.016	-.088
Medical neglect/risk	-.007	.125*	.154*	-.055	-.017	-.124*	-.053
Refusal to assume parental responsibility	-.333**	-.245**	-.201**	-.248**	.097	.363**	1.000
Neglectful supervision/risk	1.000	.053	.103	.063	-.055	-.199**	-.333
Physical Abuse/Risk	.053	1.000	.183**	.046	-.039	-.222**	-.245**
Physical neglect/risk	.103	.183**	1.000	-.016	-.030	-.271**	-.201**
Sexual Abuse/Risk	.063	.046	-.016	1.000	-.029	-.003	-.248**

	Neglectful supervision/ risk	Physical Abuse/Risk	Physical neglect/risk	Sexual Abuse/Risk	Care taker death contributes to removal	Age at removal	Refusal to assume parental responsibility
Care taker death contributes to removal	-.055	-.039	-.030	-.029	1.000	.012	.097
Age at removal	-.199**	-.222**	-.271**	-.003	.012	1.000	.363**
Average Level of Care	-.028	-.028	-.052	-.044	-.101	-.033	.093
Number of years in CPS care	.198**	.230**	.274**	-.008	-.052	-.996**	-.368**
# of placements	.079	.184**	.121*	-.052	-.055	-.488**	-.016
# of workers	.004	-.009	.048	.106	-.077	-.258**	-.020

	Average Level of Care	Number of years in CPS care	# of placements	# of workers
SSscale	-.148*	-.100	-.228**	-.159**
Gender	-.104	-.154*	-.047	-.046
Race Recode	-.091	.001	.050	-.077
Highest grade completed	-.037	-.074	.001	.016
Age as of August 31, 2009	.125*	-.007	-.027	-.265**
Abandonment	-.063	.048	-.063	-.005
Emotional abuse/risk	-.053	-.022	-.029	.048
Medical neglect/risk	.193**	.124*	.145*	.013
Refusal to assume parental responsibility	.093	-.368**	-.016	-.020
Neglectful supervision/risk	-.028	.198**	.079	.004
Physical Abuse/Risk	-.028	.230**	.184**	-.009
Physical neglect/risk	-.052	.274**	.121*	.048
Sexual Abuse/Risk	-.044	-.008	-.052	.106
Care taker death contributes to removal	-.101	-.052	-.055	-.077
Age at removal	-.033	-.996**	-.488**	-.258**
Average Level of Care	1.000	.039	.339**	.064
Number of years in CPS care	.039	1.000	.497**	.269**
# of placements	.339**	.497**	1.000	.241**
# of workers	.064	.269**	.241**	1.000

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