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Applying Social Bond Theory to Foster Care Instability and Justice System Contact

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors in Criminal Justice and Criminology requirements.

By
Therin Foley

Under the mentorship of Dr. Caitlin Brady

ABSTRACT

While placing a child in foster care is often in an effort to protect them and their future, it does not always fully succeed. Placement in foster care has been found to be highly unstable. Additionally, it has been linked to an increase in individuals' likelihood to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior. This thesis looks at the possibility that these two aspects may be related through Hirschi's (1969) Social Bond theory. It examines available data from ten different states in order to explore this idea. The results of this investigation show that the instability of the foster care system likely leads to the breaking of social bonds. This, in turn, is likely linked to the increased likelihood that those who have had contact with the system will engage in delinquent or criminal behavior. These findings are used to make several recommendations for how the foster care system can be improved and what additional research would be beneficial to that improvement process.

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Introduction

Prior research has looked at the instability in foster care placements and the delinquency or criminality of those who come into contact with the foster care system (Crawford et al. 2018; Juvenile Law Center, 2018; Kenny & Groves, 2010). The results of these studies have shown that the foster care system has an overall negative impact (Juvenile Law Center, 2018; Kenny & Groves, 2010). However, there is limited research specifically using Social Bond theory to link the instability of placements in the foster care system with its impact on delinquency and criminality. Thus, the focus of this thesis is to examine the possible link between this instability and criminality from the perspective of Social Bond theory. Three research questions are used to guide this thesis. The first research question is, “What is the current state of the foster care system?” The second research question is, “What are the consequences of this system?” The third research question is, “How can we improve the foster care system and eliminate some of the detrimental impacts that it has?”

Literature Review

Foster Care System

In the United States, each state has their own distinct foster care system. This means that there are differences in how foster care systems across the nation operate. For example, there are various possible titles that states may give to the agency that operates their foster care system. Some of the terminology used includes the Department of Family and Child Services (DFCS), Department of Social Services (DSS), Department of Human Services (DHS), and Department of Child Safety (DCS).

In addition to having different terminology, each state also has policies and procedures that are specific to its foster care system. One such difference is that some states offer extended

foster care services while others do not. These services allow the individuals in foster care to choose to remain in the system even after they turn eighteen, which is the universal age at which individuals in the system are deemed to be capable of living on their own (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). When presented with this choice, individuals who do not feel prepared to become independent can choose to remain in the system and be placed in an independent living facility or work towards that type of placement. The benefits of this are that the individuals receive educational assistance, training for home management and finances, help in setting up health care and employment, as well as life skills lessons (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). In most states, extended foster care is available to foster children until they reach the age of 21 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022a).

Despite the differences between states, the federal government provides a general definition of foster care through the Child Welfare Information Gateway. This platform is operated by the Children's Bureau, a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children & Families. Here, the system is defined as a "temporary service provided by States for children who cannot live with their families," (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023a). It is acknowledged that there are many different living situations an individual in foster care may be placed in, such as with relatives, with unrelated foster parents, in group homes, in residential care facilities, in emergency shelters, or in supervised independent living (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023a). The federal government also sets forth goals that should guide each state's foster care system. The first goal is always to ensure that the child is safe. The next most important goal is to work towards biological family reunification to the extent that it is possible and safe. This includes allowing and encouraging the biological parent to remain a key part of their child's life whenever possible. When the reunification of a biological

family is not possible, permanency in other placement types becomes the priority goal (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023b).

In addition to defining foster care and setting goals, the federal government also enacts legislation to set standards and requirements for states to follow and meet in order to continue receiving assistance through funding, programs, and services that the federal government offers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022b). Some of the laws that the federal government has enacted are the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and the Family First Prevention Services Act (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023c). CAPTA provides funding and guidance in support of preventing, treating, investigating, and prosecuting child abuse. The act also created an official federal definition for child abuse and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The Family First Prevention Services Act on the other hand aims to shift the focus of the child welfare system to keeping children safe with their biological families and avoiding the traumatic experiences that result from out-of-home placement (Kelly, 2018).

Furthermore, the federal government also compiles an annual report based on data submitted by the state agencies. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) is operated by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families' Children's Bureau, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. Among other things, this annual report details the number of individuals in the foster care system, the reasons why individuals may find themselves a part of the foster care system, and the type of placements that the state utilizes. In fiscal year 2022, there were 391,098 individuals in the foster care system in the United States (AFCARS, 2022). The reasons why individuals were placed in out-of-home care included neglect, parental drug abuse, caretaker inability to cope, physical abuse, housing, child behavior problem, parental incarceration,

parental alcohol abuse, abandonment, sexual abuse, child drug abuse, child disability, parental death, relinquishment, and child alcohol abuse. The most common reason for individuals being placed in the foster system is neglect (63%) or parental drug abuse (36%) (AFCARS, 2022). Most of them were placed with non-relative foster parents (44%) or relatives (35%), while relatively few were placed in group homes (4%) or institutions (5%) (AFCARS, 2022). The placement type that is reported by AFCARS does not reflect that many individuals experience multiple placements once placed in the care of the state.

Social Bond Theory

Hirschi's Social Bond theory holds that increased instability in a person's home and social environment can lead to increased criminality through the breakdown of the elements of a social bond. According to Hirschi (1969), social bonds are formed via close ties to individuals who the youth does not wish to disappoint, an accumulation of roles or involvements that they do not want to lose, increased access to positive methods in which to spend their free time (i.e., extracurricular community activities), and situations or individuals who may help them to develop a respect for and belief in the law and values of society. Hirschi's Social Bond theory has been re-evaluated across various contexts and populations in recent years with the results being supportive (Cassino & Rogers, 2016).

Hirschi breaks down social bonds into four basic types: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Attachment is defined as the level of affinity one has for values and institutions that are positive social influences. Commitment is described as the importance that one places on social relationships with individuals or institutions. In other words, they would not wish to jeopardize a relationship which they are committed to by behaving in a deviant or criminal manner. Involvement was explained by Hirschi (1969) to be how individuals spend their

time. If one spends their time in a pro-social activity, Hirschi (1969) posits that they would be less likely to become involved in an anti-social activity. His reasoning for this proposition was that the amount of time for them to do so is limited. The final form of social bond, belief, is characterized as the amount of respect and emphasis that one puts on the law. The assumption is that the amount of respect and emphasis that someone has for the law would coordinate with the amount of compliance that the individual has with the law. (Hirschi, 1969).

In a test of Hirschi's (1969) ideas, Wiatrowski and Swatko (1979) surveyed 2,213 10th grade male students and included questions about ability tests, family backgrounds, self-concepts, values, attitudes, plans, behaviors, and self-reported delinquent behavior. Their findings indicated that social class and achievement positively related to juvenile delinquency. The authors also found that important variables in a juvenile's life included attachment to parents, belief in social rules, involvement in school activities, belief in social conventions, and dating. As will be discussed in the next section, some correlation between the deterioration of social bonds and increased criminality can also be found in the foster care system.

Multiple Placements in Foster Care System

It is estimated that thirty-six percent of youth in foster care will have to move at least once during their time in the care of the state (Font & Sattler, 2018). The average number of placements for one individual is thirteen (Crawford et al., 2018). Despite these alarming statistics, the published data and research on why youth in foster care are relocated is limited. However, one study shows while some of the changes in placements are for the benefit of the youth, many of them are not. An example of a beneficial placement change would be if an opportunity to place the individual with a relative were presented. If placed with a relative, bonds may form quicker as the child would already have some level of attachment to their caregiver. In

cases where the move is not for the youth's benefit, it may be due to the circumstances, preferences, or requests of the foster family (Koh et al., 2014). In this situation, the youth would likely be relocated into the home of another non-relative foster family or into a group home setting. When this occurs, it takes time for social bonds to form. This would result in the bonds that the child may have developed with the prior placement family and community not being immediately replaced, which would then leave the child with a temporary lack of social bonds. This may, in turn, contribute to them having contact with the justice system as instability has been noted in research as a contributing factor to future delinquency and criminality (Kenny & Groves, 2018).

Foster Care and Justice System Contact Correlation

Existing research has shown that each placement beyond the first for a foster child increases the risk of eventually being found guilty of a felony (Crawford et al., 2018). Some estimate that over 15% of individuals who have been in foster care are later convicted of a crime. In comparison, only about 3.2% of the general population are ever convicted of a crime (Kenny & Groves, 2010). Furthermore, approximately one-quarter of individuals exiting the foster care system will come in to contact with the criminal justice system in some manner within two years of their exit (Juvenile Law Center, 2018). An examination of incarcerated individuals in California reveals that 70% of the state's prisoners were in the foster care system at some point during childhood (Kenny & Groves, 2010). Similar statistics can be seen in Illinois, with over 80% of incarcerated individuals having been in the foster care system (Kenny & Groves, 2010). These figures are important because they establish a strong positive correlation between the foster care system and criminal behavior.

In furtherance of this correlation, studies show that individuals who have been in the foster care system even have a higher risk of offending compared to their similarly situated counterparts who were not removed from their homes following an investigation of possible abuse or neglect (Kenny & Groves, 2010). Research shows that this could be due to the fact that foster care places children at a higher rate of exposure to other risk factors associated with increased rates of criminality, such as parental substance abuse and violence in the home (Yang et al., 2021). While this previous research has demonstrated a link between placement in the foster care system and future criminality (see for example Kenny & Groves, 2010), researchers have yet to determine precisely how multiple foster care placements contribute to criminality beyond references to social bonds.

Social Bond Theory in Foster Care

Support for Social Bond theory can be found in group home residents of the foster care system. While some individuals reside with relatives or non-relatives in an individual placement, others reside in these group homes. Those who are placed in these group homes are 2.5 times more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than then youth who are placed in the individual placements (Juvenile Law Center, 2018). Another area of the foster care system that provides evidence for Social Bond Theory is the type of neighborhood that a child is placed in. It has been found that youth placed in neighborhoods that are characterized by instability are significantly more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Huang et al., 2015).

Each of these findings are linked to Social Bond Theory because the variables that were researched are crucial elements of the theory. For example, a group home does not give the youth the chance to form a relationship that they would feel committed to because the attention of their pro-social influences is so thinly spread. Also, instability in a neighborhood reduces the amount

of pro-social relationships that one would be able to develop and maintain as the population is constantly shifting.

These are not the only two ties that Social Bond Theory has to foster care though. In one of the only studies to link foster care and social bond theory, researchers Kenny and Groves (2010) found that there are several elements of the foster care system that contribute to youth delinquency and future criminality. At the most basic level, the lack of a permanent home is extremely frustrating to youth who are attempting to develop an identity as they find that they lack “roots” to grow this sense-of-self from (Kenny & Groves, 2010). This ties to Hirschi’s (1969) bond of belief as it is the values and ideas that an individual holds that allow them to cultivate a sense of self and who they want to be. The frustration that is caused by this difficulty can then lead to a subconscious anger that makes one more likely to engage in deviant behavior. While the researchers acknowledge that abuse or neglect by the parents may spark these feelings initially, they also assert that multiple moves would worsen them. This links with Hirschi’s (1969) social bond of commitment as instability does not allow the individual to develop relationships that they place a great level of importance on maintaining. Confirmation of this is found in the findings of the Juvenile Law Center (2018), which indicate that 90% of youth in the foster care system with five or more moves will be involved in the criminal justice system. Beyond feelings of anger and frustration, youth who have long stays in the foster care system also suffer from other effects.

According to Kenny and Groves (2010), long stays in the foster care system lead to detachment and the destruction of the capacity for intimacy. This lack of strong social bonds means that, when tempted to behave in a deviant manner, the youth will be less likely to resist because they do not have as much motive to conform to social norms. Furthermore, they may not

develop the same level of conscience that other youth do. Conscience is fostered through concern for others, however youth in foster care may grow up feeling that others are less concerned for them and that they must take care of themselves because nobody else will. This is not to say that all youth who are in the foster care system experience these effects. In fact, some research has resulted in the identification of protective factors. Two such factors are enrollment in school and a permanent placement.

Current Study

Based on the previously mentioned research, this thesis has three research questions. Research question 1 is, “What is the current state of the foster care system?” The second research question is, “What are the consequences of this system?” Finally, the third research question is, “How can we improve the foster care system and eliminate some of the detrimental impacts that it has?”

Methods

Data

To provide answers for the previously stated research questions, I collected data from ten states with two states being selected from each of the five regions of the United States. I chose these states based on the availability of data and their inclusion in previous studies. I used reports from each state’s social services agency, along with various supplemental sources, to provide data related to eight variables. I chose these variables based on their ability to answer my three research questions. The names of the social service agencies varied by state and are detailed, along with the region that each state represents, in Table 1. Appendix A includes a reference for each data source across the ten states.

Table 1
State, Region, and Social Service Agency Names

State	Region	Agency
Arizona	Southwest	Department of Child Safety
California	West	Department of Social Services
Connecticut	Northeast	Department of Children and Families
Florida	Southeast	Department of Children and Families
Illinois	Midwest	Department of Children and Family Services
Massachusetts	Northeast	Department of Children and Families
Minnesota	Midwest	Department of Human Services
Oregon	West	Department of Human Services
Tennessee	Southeast	Department of Children's Services
Texas	Southwest	Department of Family and Protective Services

Note: United States regions. National Geographic Society. October 5, 2022; State Foster Care Information Websites. Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2023d.

Variables

The first variable I examined was the *number of youth that each state has in their foster care system*. I defined this as the number of individuals in the state's care that was reported to the Administration of Children and Families for the 2022 report. To obtain this data, I reviewed the reports that each state submitted to the US Children's Bureau for the annual Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Report.

Next, I looked at the second variable which was *age at which youth age out of foster care in each state*. I defined this variable as the age at which youth in each state are no longer eligible to be in the care of the state. I considered Extended Foster Care in this analysis because it does expand the age range during which youth are legally able to be the responsibility of the state. Despite the fact that the majority of states require the individuals who wish to remain in the state's care after they turn eighteen to apply for this service, the option was available and should be factored into the considerations (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022a). I collected this data from the Child Welfare Information Gateway's report "Extension of Foster Care Beyond Age 18."

The *mean time in care* was the third variable that I examined and I considered it to be the average number of months that individuals spend in foster care from entrance to exit. This number is not the average for the total months that an individual spends in care across all of their stays if, for example, they get reunited with their caregiver and placed back in care at a later date. The number only represents consecutive months in care (Williams et al. 2023). I gathered the statistics from the reports that each state submits to the US Children's Bureau in order for them to compile the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Report for that fiscal year. However, the states and reports I examined varied in the units of time that they used for reporting. To help make this information easier to compare, I converted all measures of time to years due to that being the most commonly used unit. The conversions that I carried out were from months, which I divided by the number of months in a year (12) to obtain a measure in the unit of years.

Following the examination of length of time in care, I analyzed the fourth variable which was the *number of placements that each individual had*. I defined this as the number of placements that a child had during the time that they were in care. Specifically, I looked at what percentage of individuals were in care at least 12 but less than 24 months who had at least three placements. I gathered this data from the Child Welfare Outcomes Report that the United States Department of Health and Human Services presents to Congress each year.

For the fifth variable, I was interested in the *types of placements* that these individuals are placed in. I specifically looked at two categories: how many of them are with relatives and how many of them are in group homes. Being placed with a relative means that the child is somehow blood related to the caregiver that they are placed with. This is different than a non-relative but family-style home, which means that they are not related to the caregiver in any way but that the

placement is with a parental figure and any other children in the home would resemble the role of siblings. On the other hand, a group home would be where the caregivers have more of a staff relationship with the children and that other children in the home would be like roommates or classmates. Some people may think of this as an orphanage or children's home. Data on the amounts of children in each of these placement types was gathered from the reports that each state submitted to the US Children's Bureau for the annual Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Report.

The sixth variable was another factor of the youths' placement environment, the *rate of sibling placement*. I defined this as whether or not the individuals were able to be placed in the same home as at least one of their siblings. Unfortunately, this statistic is not included in many agency or state reports. Consequently, I searched other types of sources and was able to find the information for some states in articles published by media outlets.

Turning to look at the impacts of the system with the seventh variable, I was interested in the *rate of foster youths' delinquent behavior*. I defined this as the amount of youth who are involved in the system and engage in delinquent behavior. I gathered this data partially from state and agency reports, however some states did not include this information and so I collected the remainder of it from third party studies and reports. In addition, the states and reports that I examined varied in the units of time that they used for reporting. To help make this information easier to compare, I converted all measures of time to years due to that being the most commonly used unit. The conversions that I carried out were from months, which I divided by the number of months in a year (12) to obtain a measure in the unit of years.

Finally, as the eighth variable, I looked at the *rate of former foster youths' criminal behavior*. The variable was defined in two ways due to some reports presenting different data.

The first definition is the ~~number of adults who at some point in their childhood were in foster care that later committed criminal offenses~~number of young adults exiting foster care that will commit criminal offenses within a few years of that exit. The second definition is the amount of current inmates in the state that once spent time in foster care. In sum, we must consider the crime rate of former foster children both from the standpoint of how many former foster children commit crime and how much crime is committed by former foster children. I gathered this data from state and agency reports, but supplemented with third party studies and reports due to some states not publishing this data. In addition, to help make things easier to compare, I converted all measures of time to years due to that being the most commonly used unit. The conversions that I carried out were from months, which I divided by the number of months in a year (12) to obtain a measure in the unit of years.

Results

Research Question 1

When I looked at the variables of the number of children in foster care and the age out of foster care, all states had reported data that could be examined as seen in Table 2. I noted that there was a lot of variation in overall numbers of children in care, with the lowest amount being from Connecticut at 3,488 and the highest being from California at 47,871. On the other hand, the age out of foster care was not nearly as diverse. Every state that I looked at, aside from Oregon, reported 21 years old as the maximum age that an individual could be in foster care. Oregon reported an age of 18 for the cutoff but does provide some assistance to individuals until they reach 21.

Table 2
Number in Foster Care and When Age Out by State

State	Children in Foster Care	Age Out of Foster Care
Arizona	14,890	21

California	47,871	21
Connecticut	3,488	21
Florida	23,507	21
Illinois	21,086	21
Massachusetts	9,191	22
Minnesota	6,870	21
Oregon	5,269	18
Tennessee	9,227	21
Texas	28,042	21

The next set of variables that I reviewed concerned the environment that an individual would be in while they were in care and can be seen in Table 3. I considered this to include the percentage that were in group homes, the percentage that were with relatives, and the percentage that were kept together with their siblings. In looking at group home placements, Texas stood out to me the most in that it does not house any foster care youth in this manner. Arizona was a distinct change from this with 15% of their foster children being housed in group homes. The remainder of the states were generally under 10%. For placements with relatives, which I was looking for a high percentage in, the standout states were Arizona and Illinois. Arizona was the highest with 52% followed by Illinois with 45%. Tennessee was the lowest with 12%. I was also looking for a high percentage in the rate of siblings that were kept together. Not all states report this statistic meaning that I could not find the necessary data to examine the variable in some states. The states that I could not locate the rate of siblings kept together for were Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, and Tennessee. Of the states that I could find the data for, California had the best rate with 74%. Arizona had the lowest number with only around 30% being kept together with a sibling.

Table 3*Breakdown of Placement Type and Environment by State*

State	Group Homes	Relatives	Siblings Kept Together
Arizona	15%	52%	approximately 30%
California	3%	36%	74%
Connecticut	4%	37%	not reported
Florida	7%	42%	65%
Illinois	1%	45%	not reported
Massachusetts	10%	28%	64%
Minnesota	6%	40%	not reported
Oregon	1%	35%	72.8% if only 2
Tennessee	9%	12%	not reported
Texas	0%	34%	66.2%

As shown below in Table 4, I next looked at the stability in foster care and how long individuals were subject to foster care in general. For the average time that an individual spends in care, Tennessee had the lowest rate at 1.3 years. The trend for all of the states was to hover between 1.5 and 2.5 years. For the number of placements that individuals experience in this time, the state with the highest percentage of individuals going through at least three placements if in care for 12 to less than 24 months was Texas at 43.7%. The state with the lowest percentage was Connecticut with 24.1%. Overall, the trend appeared to be that around 25-45% of individuals in care for 12 to less than 24 months would experience at least three placements.

Table 4*Time in Care and Number of Placements by State*

State	Average Time in Care (Years)	Placement Amount (% with 3 or more if in care 12 to less than 24 months)
Arizona	1.6	34.6%
California	2.1	25.5%
Connecticut	2.6	24.1%
Florida	1.5	30.3%
Illinois	2.4	31.5%
Massachusetts	2.1	40.6%
Minnesota	1.7	28.2%
Oregon	2.1	32.3%
Tennessee	1.3	39.6%
Texas	1.6	43.7%

Research Question 2

The final variables that I looked at were those that have a link to crime. As seen in Table 5, I found that the state with the largest amount of individuals having both juvenile justice system and child welfare system contact was Tennessee with 90% of their juvenile detainees having had contact with child welfare services at some point. The lowest was Oregon, with only 13%. This variable did have a minor complication due to the fact that it was also examined as a percentage of foster care children that had contact with the juvenile justice system. The state with the lowest reported number when examined this way, was Florida with only 7.8% of their foster children being in contact with corrections. Looking into the adulthood of those who have been in the foster system, I found that Illinois had the highest amounts of inmates that had previous contact with the foster system at 80%. The state with the lowest amounts of inmates having been in foster care at some point was Oregon with 8%. However, I encountered an unexpected obstacle that this variable was reported in another manner as well. The second method of reporting looked at the foster children who exit care and their specific outcomes. In this form of reporting, the states with the highest rates were Texas, Tennessee, and Minnesota. I have listed three states here because each followed up on the individuals after a different amount of time. The data indicated that Texas had 68% of males and 40.5% of females arrested since they exited the system, but they did not specify the time frame that they used. Rather, they focused on age by interviewing 23 year old former foster children who were in foster care for at least 1 year. Tennessee reported 60% of males who exited care were arrested within five years but did not include any data on females. Minnesota's numbers were that 50% of youth who exited foster care were arrested within 2 years. The state with the lowest rate was Connecticut, with 11% of exiting foster children incarcerated and 18% referred to a program for substance abuse.

Table 5*Delinquency and Criminality Among Individuals with Child Services Contact by State*

State	Delinquent Behavior While Under Age	Adult Criminal Offenses
Arizona	Approximately 50%	not reported
California	Approximately 50%	Over 70% inmates had time in care
Connecticut	75% detainees in care at some point	11% incarcerated/18% substance abuse at exit
Florida	7.8%	25% males/15% females within 1.5 yrs of exit
Illinois	Over 52% age 11+ report in last .5 yr	80% of inmates in care at some point
Massachusetts	72% detainees had system contact	20-27% males arrested 1 yr post age-out
Minnesota	34.6%	50% time in jail/prison within 2 yrs of age out
Oregon	13% had foster care contact	8% of those entering DOC had prior foster care
Tennessee	90% had child welfare contact	60% of males arrested within 5 yrs of age out
Texas	Possibly 50%(+) contact at some point	68% male/40.5% female arrested since exit

Discussion

The focus of this thesis was to collect data that could give an overview of the foster care system. Additionally, the current study examined consequences of the foster care system with the goal of suggesting improvements to ameliorate negative effects on youth. Three research questions guided the current study and each was answered with data from various sources focusing on ten states, two from each region of the country. Eight pieces of information were collected for each of the ten states including number of youth in foster care, average time in foster care, average number and type of placements, delinquent behavior, and former foster youths' criminal behavior. Research Question 1 was, "What is the current state of the foster care system?" The data in response to this question indicated that most foster care systems allow individuals to remain in their care until the age of 21. However, the data also showed that systems are unable to provide stable placement during the time that an individual is in their care, which, on average, is between 1.5 and 2.5 years. This was consistent with the national data reported in the 2019 Child Welfare Outcomes Report to Congress by the Children's Bureau, which stated that the majority of states saw a decrease in placement stability as the time in care increased beyond 12 months. The data I collected also indicated that there is a large number of individuals in care that are not able to be placed with a relative or remain with their siblings, which is consistent with national data reported in the 2021 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting Systems Report by the Children's Bureau.

The second research question was, "What are the consequences of this system?" Reviewing the data it is noticeable that most states have a foster care delinquency rate of over 50%. The adult criminality rate of children with prior system contact is high as well, with large numbers of inmates in some states reporting having prior contact and most states having over

25% of those exiting care ultimately being arrested. These rates were consistent with the findings of Kenny and Groves in their 2018 study, *Bonding and the Case for Permanence*. The study showed that, in some states, 75% of juvenile detainees have spent time in foster care, 80% of inmates have spent time in foster care, and between 30% and 40% of former foster youth have been arrested since exiting the system.

The third research question was, “How can we improve the foster care system and eliminate some of the detrimental impacts that it has?” To answer the third research question the next sections include a link to social bond theory (Hirschi, 1969) and recommendations for next steps based on foster care system involvement and social bonds.

Link to Social Bond Theory

The purpose of compiling and studying the data that I collected was to determine if foster care leads to a deterioration in social bonds and, in turn, increases their delinquent and criminal behaviors. The rate at which foster children are classified as delinquent combined with the rate of former foster children that end up offending criminally in adulthood confirm that those who have had contact with the foster care system do, in fact, behave in criminal or delinquent behaviors at a high rate. According to Social Bond theory by Hirschi (1969), this high rate of offending would be due to the deterioration of social bonds that are crucial in keeping individuals from violating societal norms and the law. This deterioration, Hirschi (1969) states, is due to instability in an individual’s home and social environment. The statistics on the current state of foster care seem to meet the definition of instability as they show that youth are forced to move several times while in care and are often not able to be placed with an individual whom they are related to. In fact, there are instances where siblings are not even able to be kept together despite the benefit that this would most likely offer, as research shows that sibling relationships provide general

positive support. In addition, the relationship that siblings share can serve as a protective factor for youth who are removed from their homes and families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019b).

Improvements and Recommendations

The first step to improving the status of the foster care system is to increase the availability and uniformity of data on the topic. While much data is published through federal reports, it does not incorporate all of the necessary factors for being able to see the full picture of the foster care system. For example, statistics for the number of siblings that are kept together is not included in the federal report at all and was only reported by some states.

I encountered the problem of data availability with more frequency when I began looking at the criminality of individuals who were, or had been, in the foster care system. Many states included juvenile statistics in a report on dual-contact youth rather than adding it to their foster care statistics. Other states did not report this data at all. As a result, I had to find many of the numbers for adult criminality among individuals who had once been in the foster care system in private studies. Overall, this inconsistency in data reporting suggests a need for a more comprehensive and universal data collection system on foster care, the experiences of individuals in the system, and long-term outcomes for those with involvement. Having a universal reporting mechanism will help examine trends across the United States and identify areas of concern.

In addition to the need for more uniformity in and availability of data, the numbers reflected within the data are problematic. The percentage of juveniles involved in both foster care and the criminal justice system is alarming, as is the percentage of adults being arrested that have had contact with the foster care system. In my opinion, this is closely linked to the number of moves that an individual must go through while in foster care. I examined this instability by

looking at the percentage of individuals who had to move three or more times while in the foster care system. The link between having three or more placements and high criminality rates can be seen when examining the states with the highest rates of each. For example, Tennessee has one of the three highest percentages for the number of children with three or more placements during their time in foster care and the highest percentage of individuals that have had both foster care and criminal justice system contact. This supports a second recommendation that stability within the foster care system needs to be improved. Stability for those in the foster care system would mean reducing the number of placements that an individual has while in the state's care.

Furthermore, the data suggests that group homes contribute to the likelihood of delinquency and criminality. One example is Massachusetts, which has the second highest percentage of children in group homes and the third highest percentage of dual contact with the foster care and criminal justice systems. On the other hand, Oregon had the second lowest percentage of individuals in group homes, the second lowest percentage of dual contact youth, and the lowest percentage of inmates reporting having spent time in foster care. These findings support a third recommendation of limiting the use of group homes in terms of the amount of time an individual spends there. The use of group homes should also be restricted to only the most necessary situations (e.g., when behavioral tendencies and emotional responses are unstable or high-risk).

The importance of the type of placement (e.g., with family, group home) is further seen when looking at Texas, which has the third lowest percentage of individuals in foster care being placed with relatives. In turn, Texas also has the highest rate of those exiting foster care being arrested. Florida, in contrast, has the third highest percentage of foster children being placed with relatives and the second lowest percentage of those exiting foster care being arrested. The rate at

which siblings are kept together also appears to be important. Oregon has the second highest rate for this category, the second lowest rate for those in foster care also having criminal justice system contact, and the lowest rate of inmates reporting prior foster system contact. Conversely, Arizona reports the lowest percentage of siblings being kept together and has one of the top five highest juvenile delinquency rates for children in care. Therefore, a fourth recommendation is to make placing individuals entering the foster care system with relatives a priority and exhausting every avenue of placing the individual with family before turning to other options. This includes keeping siblings together as well as placements with family or relatives.

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that efforts should focus on trying to improve the availability and uniformity of data, decrease the number of overall placements, increase the number of relative placements, and keep all siblings together. This would significantly help the instability of the foster care system to be reduced, and thus decrease the delinquency and criminality of those who have had contact with it.

Limitations

While the findings from the current study are able to offer recommendations there are also some limitations to note. First, I was limited in my ability to find the desired statistics for every state. Several states did not report the percentage of siblings being kept together and one state did not report the amount of adult criminality in individuals who had once been in foster care. Even for the states that I was able to find all of the desired data for, I was forced to rely on third party sources for many of them whereas I would have preferred to have data directly from the state itself.

In addition, there were multiple ways that states used to report certain variables. This made it difficult to compare the states as a whole. Rather, I had to group them by how the

variable was reported. However, even when I used this method, there were still variations in reporting that impeded my ability to get accurate comparisons. This was especially true for the variable of adult criminality.

Finally, the number of children in foster care was only reported as an exact number rather than a percentage of the states' juvenile populations. This also made it difficult to draw adequate comparisons due to the large variation in the sizes of the states not being taken into consideration.

Conclusion

In sum, this thesis examined the possible link between the instability of foster care placements and the system's apparent behavioral consequences for those who come into contact with the system. Social Bond theory (Hirschi, 1969) was used as a lens for this examination in order to determine whether it may link the two aspects. Three research questions were answered using multiple sources of data across ten states, two from each region of the United States. The findings indicated that the instability of the foster care system likely results in the breaking of social bonds, which is likely linked to the delinquent and criminal behavior of those who have had contact with the foster care system (Hirschi, 1969). These findings were then used to make recommendations, which include improving data uniformity and reporting of foster care data as well as increasing the possibility of positive outcomes for foster care involved individuals by considering placement with family (i.e., relative and sibling) to be of the upmost importance. Future research efforts should focus on comparing data from all fifty states and examining the percentage of the juvenile population that the foster care population makes up in each state. The former will give a broader picture of the scenario and the latter will allow for more accurate comparison. Conducting further studies like this one with that improvement of data would only

increase the efficacy in confirming a link to Social Bond theory and recommending steps to minimize the negative effects that the foster care system has on youth who have been in contact with it.

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Appendix A

References for Data

State	Variable	Source
AZ	Children in Foster Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Arizona Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Wwww.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-az-2021.pdf
	Percentage in Group Homes	
	Percentage with Relatives	
	Average Time in Care	
	Age out of Foster Care	
	Rate of Siblings Kept Together	Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022a). <i>Extension of foster care beyond age 18</i> . U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
	Amount of Placements	Clawson, S. (2015, July 15). <i>Jessie, Andres are brothers looking for a loving family</i> . The Arizona Republic. https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2015/07/15/jessie-andres-brothers-looking-loving-family-cbt/29922449/#
	Juvenile Delinquency	Arizona. (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov. https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/arizona.html
CA	Children in Foster Care	Halemba, G. J., Siegel, G. C., Lord, R. D., & Sawacki, S. (2004, November 30). <i>Dual Jurisdiction Study</i> . Arizona Judicial Branch . https://www.azcourts.gov/casa/Child-Welfare-Stats.aspx
	Percentage in Group Homes	
	Percentage with Relatives	
	Average Time in Care	
	Age Out of Care	

	https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
Siblings Kept Together	Berkley, U. of C. (2019, December 4). <i>California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP)</i> . https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/Siblings/MTMG/r/fcp/l
Amount of Placements	California. (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov. https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/california.html
Juvenile Delinquency	California Judicial Council. (2017). <i>Dual-Status Youth Data Standards (AB 1911) - california courts</i> . Dual Status Youth Data Standards . https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/lr-2017-JC-dual-status-youth-data-ab1911-standards-2017.pdf
Adult Criminality	Kenny, J., & Groves, L. (2018). Striking Back in Anger: Delinquency and Crime in Foster Children. In <i>Bonding and the Case for Permeance</i> .
CT	
Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Connecticut Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Www.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-ct-2021.pdf
Age out of Care	Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022a). <i>Extension of foster care beyond age 18</i> . U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
Amount of Placements	Connecticut Child Welfare Outcomes. Connecticut. (n.d.). https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/connecticut.html
Juvenile Delinquency	Kenny, J., & Groves, L. (2018). Striking Back in Anger: Delinquency and Crime in Foster Children. In <i>Bonding and the Case for Permeance</i> .

Adult Criminality	Department of Children and Families. (n.d.). <i>V.I.T.A.L. Overview</i> . Connecticut.gov. https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/Adolescents/VITAL-Policies/10.pdf
FL	
Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Florida Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Wwww.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-fl-2021.pdf
Age out of Care	Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022a). <i>Extension of foster care beyond age 18</i> . U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
Amount of Placements	<i>Florida Child Welfare Outcomes</i> . Florida. (n.d.). https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/florida.html
Siblings Kept Together	Harris, S. L., & DeSantis, R. (2021, October). <i>2021 Annual Performance Report</i> . Department of Children and Families. https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2023-02/Annual Performance Report 2020-21.pdf
Juvenile Delinquency	<i>DCF/DJJ Dually Served Children and Young Adults</i> . (2023). https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2023-02/DJJ DCF Dually Served Youth Report 2021-22 Q4.pdf
Adult Criminality	--- <i>When Kids "Age Out."</i> (n.d.). Palm Beach County Unites for Children. https://www.pbcunites.org/---when-kids-age-out.html
IL	
Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Illinois Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Wwww.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-il-2021.pdf
Age out of Care	Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022a). <i>Extension of foster care beyond age 18</i> . U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau.

	https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
Amount of Placements	Illinois. (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov. https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/illinois.html
Juvenile Delinquency	Cross, T., Tran, S., & Kwon, S. (2020). <i>Delinquent Behavior of Youth in DCFS Care: Findings from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study</i> . https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/bf_20200924_DelinquentBehaviorOfYouthInDCFSCareFindingsFromThe2017IllinoisChildWell-BeingStudy.pdf
Adult Criminality	Kenny, J., & Groves, L. (2018). Striking Back in Anger: Delinquency and Crime in Foster Children. In <i>Bonding and the Case for Permeance</i> .
MA	
Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Massachusetts Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Www.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-ma-2021.pdf
Age out of Care	Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022a). <i>Extension of foster care beyond age 18</i> . U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
Amount of Placements	Massachusetts. (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov. https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/massachusetts.html
Siblings Kept Together	Massachusetts Department of Children and Families Annual Report FY2022. (n.d.). https://www.mass.gov/doc/fy-2022/download
Juvenile Delinquency	Missed Opportunities. (n.d.). CfJJ. Retrieved September 14, 2023, from https://www.cfjj.org/missed-opp
MN	

Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Minnesota Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Wwww.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-mn-2021.pdf
Age out of Care	Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022a). <i>Extension of foster care beyond age 18</i> . U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
Amount of Placements	Minnesota. (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov. https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/minnesota.html
Juvenile Delinquency	<i>Out-of-home Placement Characteristics and Crossover from Foster Care to Juvenile Justice PuRPOSE of the Study BACKgRound & PuRPOSE</i> . (n.d.). Retrieved September 19, 2023, from https://cascw.umn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Brief-55_layout_WEB508.pdf
Adult Criminality	<i>Youth in Transition – Care in Action Minnesota</i> . (n.d.). https://www.careinactionmn.org/youth-in-transition/
OR	
Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Oregon Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Wwww.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-or-2021.pdf
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Amount of Placements	<i>Oregon.</i> (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov. Retrieved September 19, 2023, from https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/oregon.html
Juvenile Delinquency	Braun, M. (2015). <i>Estimating the Probability of Commitment to OYA from History of Social Service Involvement</i> . https://www.oregon.gov/oia/Research/ProbabilityCommitmentOYAHistoriesSocialServiceInvolvement.pdf
Adult Criminality	<i>Prevalence and Timing of DHS, OHA, and OYA Services Prior to First DOC Commitment.</i> (2015). https://www.oregon.gov/oia/Research/2015%20A%20DOCFeederSystem-Report1.pdf
TN	
Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Tennessee Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . Wwww.acf.hhs.gov. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-tn-2021.pdf
Age out of Care	Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022a). <i>Extension of foster care beyond age 18</i> . U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/
Amount of Placements	<i>Tennessee.</i> (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov. https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/tennessee.html
Juvenile Delinquency	Sherwood, L. (2023, August 9). <i>Press Release on TN General Assembly Special Session</i> . Disability Rights. https://www.disabilityrightstn.org/aug-2023-special-session/
Adult Criminality	<i>Around 8,500 children in foster care across Tennessee, and around 450 up for adoption at any time.</i> (2022). Wbir.com. https://www.wbir.com/article/life/family/nonprofit-working-to-improve-foster-care-and-adoption-in-tennessee/51-eddf213-f8f7-4b0b-9bb9-de7d04e24c29
TX	

Children in Foster Care Percentage in Group Homes Percentage with Relatives Average Time in Care	Administration of Children and Families. (2022, June 28). <i>Texas Data and Statistics: AFCARS</i> . www.acf.hhs.gov . https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-tx-2021.pdf
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Siblings Kept Together	<i>Biggest Needs in Texas Foster Care and Adoption · Foster Care and Adoption · Buckner International</i> . (n.d.). Buckner International. Retrieved September 22, 2023, from https://www.buckner.org/fostercareadoptionneeds/#:~:text=The%20Texas%20Department%20of%20Family%20and%20Protective%20Services%20reports%20that
Amount of Placements	<i>Texas</i> . (n.d.). Cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov . https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/texas.html
Juvenile Delinquency	Ryan, J. P., Marshall, J. M., Herz, D., & Hernandez, P. M. (2008). Juvenile delinquency in child welfare: Investigating group home effects. <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 30(9), 1088–1099. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.02.004
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