



Educational Experiences of Youth in Foster Care: A Review of the Literature



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DEMOGRAPHICS

There are over 510,000 children in foster care in the United States.¹ Of these half million, more than half come from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds. Foster children of African American and Hispanic descent, for example, are over represented in the foster care system compared to their representation in the general population. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 32% of children in foster care are African American and 19% are of Latino backgrounds, compared to the demographics of 13% African Americans and 15% Latinos for the general U.S. population.²

Of the 510,000 children in the U.S. foster care system, the average child remains in state custody for 28.3 months. With respect to gender, 52% of the children in care are male and 48% are female. In the state of Missouri alone, there are 11,433 children in foster care. Of these, 30.7% are between the ages of 0 and 5; 28.4% are between ages of 6 and 12; and 40.8% are between ages of 13 and 21. State demographics also show that 50% of the state's children in foster care experience three or more placements, compared to the 42% of the national data, indicating a higher placement rate for Missouri's children in foster care.

Children enter the foster care system as a result of having experienced parental abuse or neglect. Because of the abuse, neglect, and home instability they experience, it is no wonder that foster children are one of the most educationally at-risk populations of students³.

HOME/SCHOOL STABILITY

Research also shows that compared to students who are not in the foster care system, foster youth are more likely to have changed schools.^{4, 5, 6, 7, 8} Data collected in California revealed that foster youth attended approximately nine different schools before they graduated from high school.⁶ In Blome's (1997) longitudinal study on the educational experiences of foster and non-foster care youth, 64% of foster youth had changed schools at least once, compared to 80% of the comparison group who had never experienced a change in school. Research shows that the more placement changes foster children experience, the more likely they are to have at least one severe academic delay.⁸

Research also shows that so much school and home mobility has a negative impact on the educational achievement of students in foster care. Conger & Rebeck (2001) studied the 12,422 children in the New York City foster care system and found that oftentimes, home placements came along with school transfers, which negatively affected their performance on math tests.⁵ In addition to the negative effect placement changes have on exam performance, having numerous placements sometimes causes children to lose schooling for large chunks of the year, to lose academic credit, and an incomplete school file due to missing grades, assessments, special needs notes, and attendance records.⁹

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

With a history of abuse and neglect, in addition to experiencing sometimes multiple home placements, youth in foster care are also more likely to have academic and behavior problems at school.^{10, 11, 12, 7} Foster youth have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, 75% perform below grade level and more than 50% have been retained at least one grade in school.¹²

A study on a randomly selected sample of 302 children between the ages of 6 and 12 living in foster care showed that a large 69% of them screened positive for academic delays, school failure, or a related behavior problem. More specifically, 23% of all foster children had delays in math or reading.⁸ In some studies, scores of tests taken during the children's foster care experience were lower than when the children were no longer in foster care. Of the 302 children in foster care studied, 13% of them had repeated a grade, and 14% had been suspended or expelled from school at least once. Findings also revealed that the longer the children were in foster care, the more likely they were to be expelled or suspended from school.

While the literature shows that foster children are at an academic disadvantage, it is unclear whether they fare worse academically compared to the general population of children of low-income backgrounds.¹¹ A review of the literature revealed that some research suggests that there are no significant differences in test performance between foster children and low income students.¹³ Buehler et al. (2000) found similar results when comparing the long-term correlates of experiencing foster care. They found that adults formerly in foster care were less adjusted in the area of education compared to the randomly selected comparison group. However, when it came to comparing former foster care youth to other adults with similar demographic variables such as age, gender, race, and parents' educational attainment levels, among other factors, findings showed that both groups displayed similar indicators of adjustment, thus suggesting that while foster youth do have more academic problems than the general population, their experiences are not significantly different from those experienced by people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to provide a comprehensive summary of the literature on the educational experiences of children in foster care. In particular, special attention is paid to high school graduation rates, high school performance, school stability, parental involvement, and post high school plans among youth with a foster home placement history.

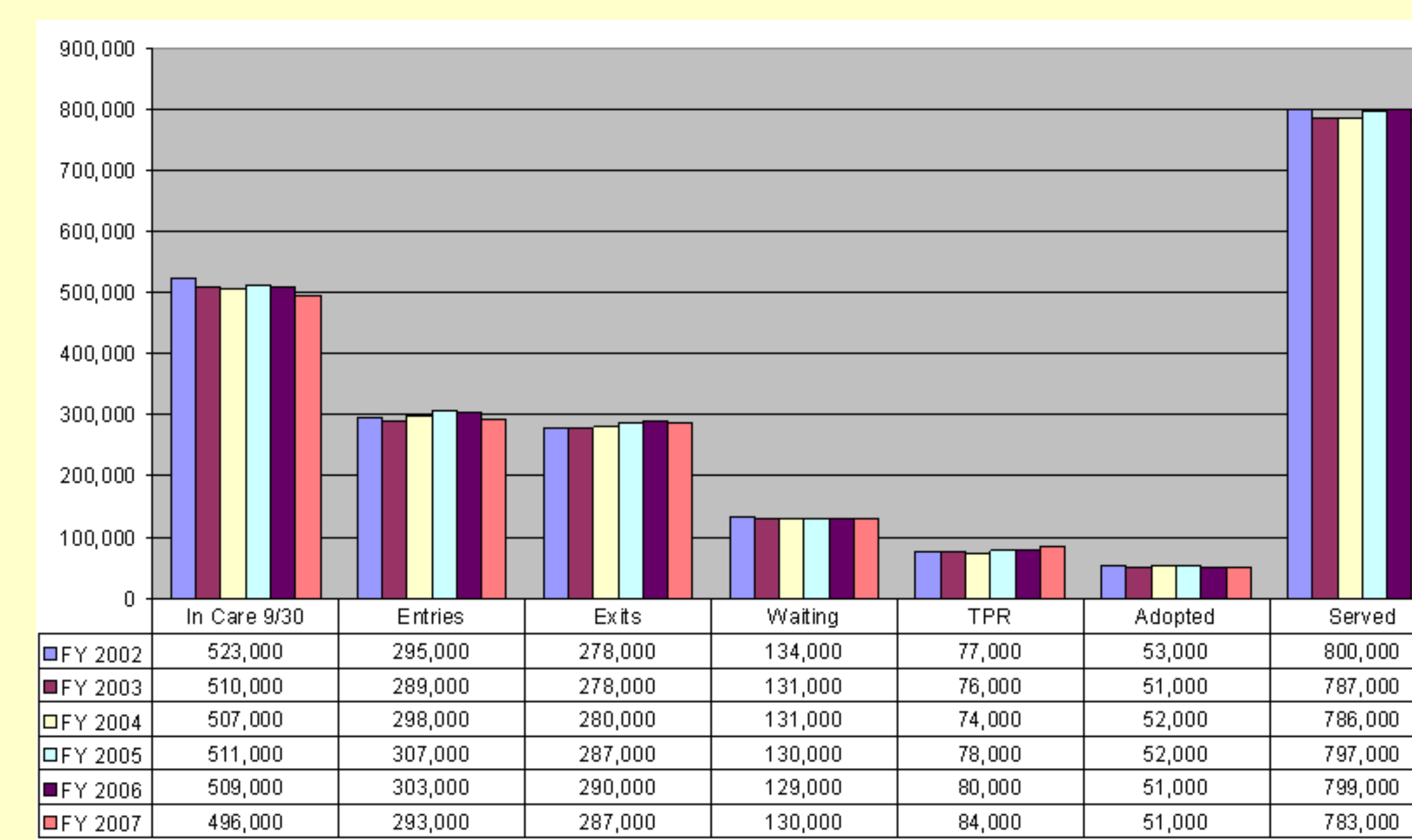
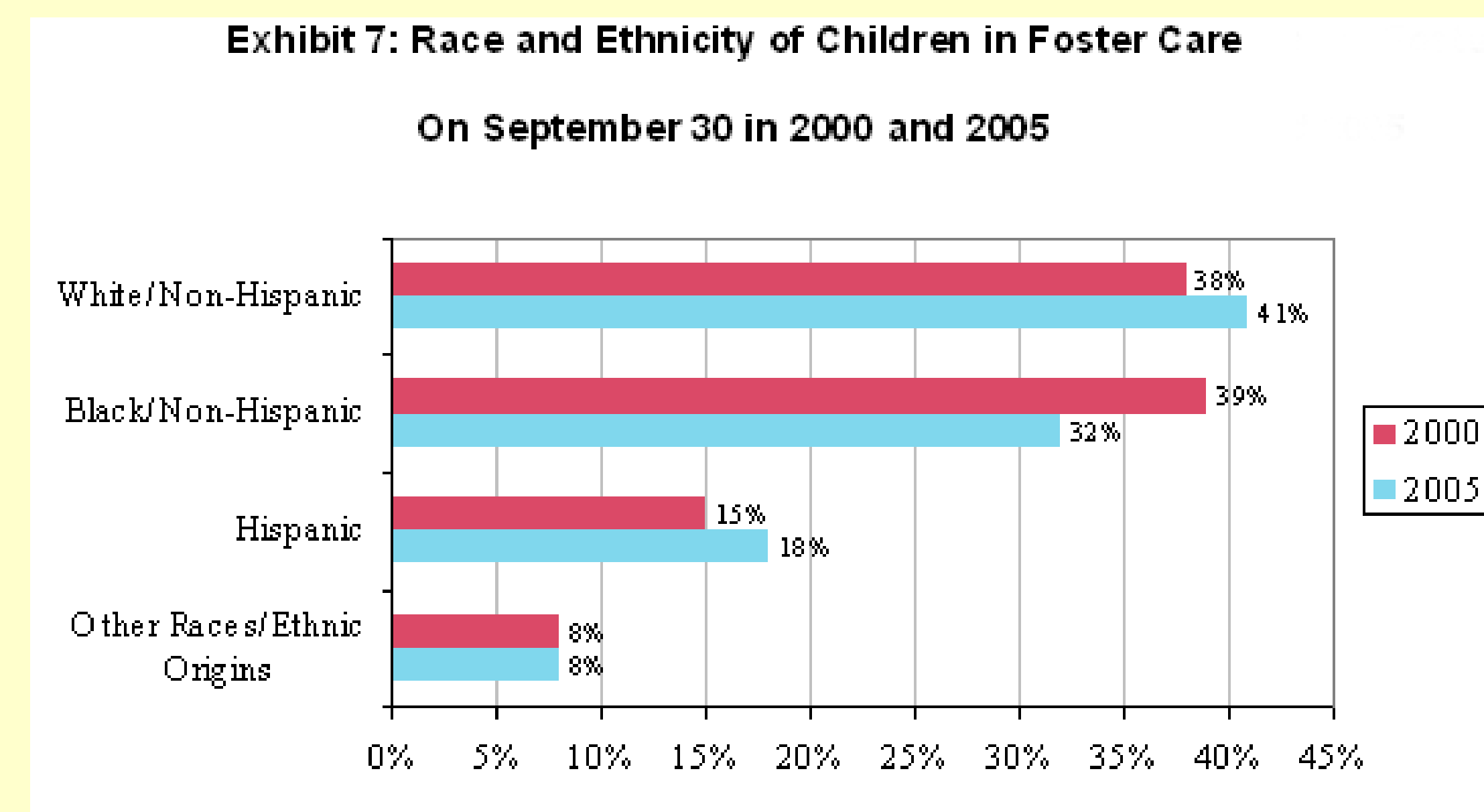
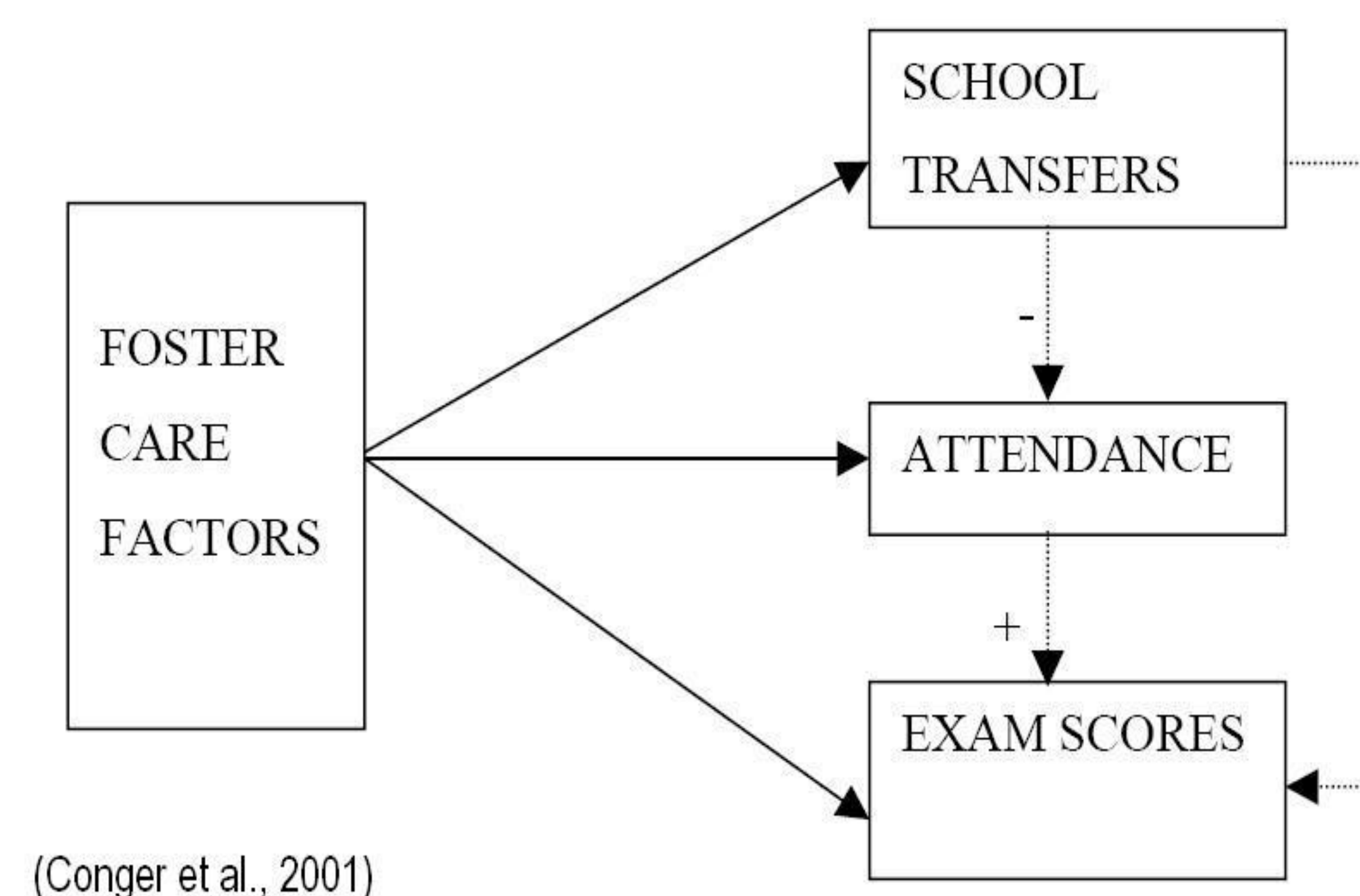


Figure 1: Causal Model



HIGH SCHOOL ATTAINMENT LEVEL/POST HIGH SCHOOL PLANS

With respect to the educational attainment levels of foster youth, numerous studies show they graduate at lower rates than the general population.^{14,4,10,11,15} A review of the state of Washington's foster youth, for example, shows that only 30% of the youth emancipating from foster care graduate with a high school diploma or a GED.¹⁴ With respect to post-high school plans, a mere 13% of foster care youth pursue college, and of these, less than 11% graduate from a four-year university. Although different studies report different percentages for high school and college attainment levels, the overall finding that foster youth have lower educational attainment levels is the same.

A longitudinal study by Blome (1997) found that foster care youth dropped out of high school at a higher rate than the comparison group, 37% compared to 16% respectively. Five years later, 23% of foster youth still had not received a diploma or GED, compared to only 7% of the non-foster youth group. A research synthesis on the effects of foster care found that the median for years of schooling completed was around 10, which was at least a year less than the rest of students.¹¹

Not only are foster youth more likely to drop out of high school than their non-foster youth peers, but they are also more likely to participate in vocational training programs and less likely to be enrolled in a college track or even attend college.^{4,11} Compared to 32% of the comparison group, only 15% of foster youth enrolled in college preparatory classes during high school. Foster youth also had lower educational attainment goals than the comparison group. Nineteen percent expected to graduate from a vocational school, compared to 12% of those in the comparison group. Additionally, only a mere 35% expected to receive a bachelor's degree, compared to almost half of the comparison group.

While the majority of the literature suggests that foster youth have lower high school attainment levels than youth who were never in foster care, one study reported contradictory findings.⁷ A review of the records of 1,087 adults who were once in foster care, in addition to interviews conducted with them, showed that on average, not only were their high school graduation and college enrollment rates similar to those of the general population, but in some cases, former foster youth graduated at even higher rates. While this finding was different from the rest of the literature, Pecora et al. (2006) did find similar findings with respect to GED and college dropout rates. More foster youth tend to obtain GEDs instead of high school diplomas more than non-foster care youth, 18.6% for the foster youth and only 5% for the non-foster youth group respectively. They also tend to have lower college completion rates than non-foster care youth.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

With respect to parental involvement in school, research shows that foster youth are at a disadvantage because of the little support they receive from their parents or legal guardians. When it comes to financial aid, for example, foster care high school graduates are less likely to count on financial help from a parent or guardian.⁴ Only one-third of foster youth high school graduates counted on family financial support compared to almost half of the non-foster care youth. In Blome's (1997) longitudinal study of foster youth educational experiences, foster youth received \$600 in academic financial help from parents compared to the \$2,000 that the comparison group received.

Parents and guardians in the lives of foster youth are also less likely to be involved in the student's education. Caregivers of foster youth are less likely to check their homework or to attend parent-teacher conferences.⁴ Research shows that when teachers were asked to rate the level of foster parents' involvement in the work of the foster children in their classes as compared to the engagement of other parents, 41% of the foster parents were rated as being less than moderately involved.¹¹ The existing research also highlights the foster children's perceptions of their foster parents' school involvement. Oftentimes, the children perceived that no one showed any interest in them, nor did they have high academic expectations for them.

CONCLUSION

Foster youth are more likely than non-foster youth for numerous negative educational outcomes. These include that they are more likely to have higher absenteeism, to have more disciplinary referrals, to perform below grade level, to be retained one grade level, to graduate at lower rates, and to drop out of school. It is unclear, however, the most likely causes for these negative outcomes, which may include high poverty levels, less parental involvement, transience, pre-existing learning disabilities or behavioral/emotional concerns which negatively impact both education and family life. Research on determining an accurate path model between potential causal factors, mediating or moderating factors, and negative educational outcomes is recommended. This would allow intervention at the most influential point.