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Functional outcomes among sexual minority youth emancipating from the child welfare system



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ABSTRACT

The heterogeneity of youth emancipating from the foster care system makes it difficult to establish the extent to which their functional outcomes are equivalent across different subgroups. In the present study, we use secondary data from the Multi Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (MSEYP) to explore the challenges faced by sexual minority youths in comparison to their heterosexual peers. We focus on measurements of key independent living outcomes at age 19 to obtain a broad picture of how sexual minority youth fare during the period of transition to adulthood. Bivariate results indicate that the deficits for sexual minority youth are noteworthy across all categories of functional outcomes (i.e. education, employment, homelessness and financial stability). Furthermore, results from binary logistic regression models indicate that sexual orientation was associated with each category of functional outcomes, even when controlling for demographics and child welfare history factors. Findings suggest that sexual minority youth leaving foster care are particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes and may require more intensive supports during the period of transition to adulthood. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, researchers, child welfare professionals and legislators have worked to systematically address the difficulties foster care alumni experience relative to their non-foster care peers. There is substantial research documenting the challenges and obstacles faced by foster care alumni, ranging from interpersonal, psychosocial, and health challenges to difficulties in fulfilling age-pertinent achievements, such as completing higher education, securing consistent employment and living in stable and independent environments (Barth, 1990; Courtney, 2009; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; Simmel, Shpiegel, & Murshid, 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Much of this work has been instrumental in addressing the process by which foster youth transition out of the child welfare system, as well as in identifying gaps that persist following the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (commonly referred to as the Chafee Act). The Chafee Act is notable for broadening the scope and type of transitional services and supports provided to foster youth, as well as the age of eligibility for receipt of these services (National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000). In essence, these

program modifications recognized that preparation for adulthood requires an initiation of sustained support delivered to youth early in adolescence and not simply a flurry of training exercises just as youth are about to depart the system.

These policy advances notwithstanding, the heterogeneity of youth involved with the child welfare system makes it difficult to establish the extent to which functional outcomes (i.e., housing; education; employment) are equivalent across all members of this population, or whether specific sub-groups of foster care alumni are more disadvantaged than others. This is an important and timely concern as many states have modified and expanded their child welfare services to better address the broad needs of adolescents, including service provision during the typically vulnerable phase of transition to adulthood (Children's Bureau's, 2013). For instance, many states have expanded the age at which youth can remain involved with the child welfare system, or opt to re-open system involvement (Children's Bureau's, 2013). These changes hint at the arguably protective nature of many child welfare programs geared toward this age group. However, it is necessary to examine variations in outcomes among different subgroups to understand how existing services and programs can be refined to promote positive functioning for all foster care alumni. For this paper, we use data from the Congressionally mandated project entitled Multi Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs to explore the challenges that a specific sub-group – sexual minority youth – face, in comparison to their heterosexual peers. We focus on measurements of key independent living

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outcomes to get a broad picture of how sexual minority youth fare during the transition from foster care to independence.¹

1.1. Brief overview of relevant policy and federal initiatives

This project is partially informed by two federal policy actions for foster youth: the Chafee Act and the more recent Information Memorandum (IM) of 2011 (*Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2011*). The Chafee Act replaced the former federal Independent Living structure that was in place to serve foster youth as they prepared to depart the child welfare system. Following the passage of the Chafee Act, states could elect to provide services, namely the provision of Medicaid and housing assistance, to youth after the age of 18 (generally until age 21). And, critically, funding for expanding the services and programs for transitioning youth was increased (*National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000*). Thus the Chafee Act reflects a remarkable shift in states' focus and responsibility for foster youth transitioning to adulthood, including a commitment to promoting self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, in 2011, the Children's Bureau issued an Information Memorandum that outlined the need for ensuring best practices within the child welfare system such that states are actively and effectively "protecting and supporting" sexual minority youth while they are in foster care. The IM is explicit in conveying that states need to improve best practices in addressing sexual minority youths' safety and permanency needs. We argue that a logical extension of the 2011 IM and the 1999 Chafee Act mandates is to ensure that sexual minority youth are receiving effective preparation for life after leaving foster care. However, little information currently exists about the outcomes of sexual minority youth as compared to their heterosexual peers. Understanding the extent of challenges faced by these youth is critical for a successful implementation of both pieces of federal action.

1.2. Gaps in services for sexual minority youth

There is a strong basis for focusing on the outcomes solely for sexual minority youth who are involved with the child welfare system. While the transition to adulthood encompasses a set of risks for most foster care alumni, sexual minority youth may face additional challenges and perils. Recent research as well as policy memos and legal briefs and reviews reveal the extent to which sexual minority youth contend with stressors presumably connected to their sexual orientation: rejection by biological families (*Elze, 2014; Khoury, 2007; Tamar-Mattis, 2005; Yarbrough, 2012*); lack of permanency (*Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002; Wilbur, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006; Yarbrough, 2012*); victimization by peers (*Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Gallegos et al., 2011*); placement in restrictive settings (*Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Khoury, 2007; Sullivan, Sommers, & Moff, 2001; Tamar-Mattis, 2005*); and, insufficient or absent support from staff, foster parents, and caseworkers (*ACF, 2011; Elze, 2014; Gallegos et al., 2011; Mallon et al., 2002; Nolan, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2001; Tamar-Mattis, 2005*).

First, sexual minority youths' involvement with child welfare services may directly stem from family conflicts surrounding sexual orientation, resulting in irrevocable dislocation from family members. Entry into the child welfare system may be instigated by biological families' rejection of youths' sexuality (*Elze, 2014; Khoury, 2007; Mallon et al., 2002*), which may also constrain opportunities for reunification once in out-of-home care. As *Elze (2014)* notes, "(U)nlike their heterosexual and gender-conforming peers, LGBTQ youths often face familial rejection in response to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression. Heterosexism in families can directly result in the youth's ejection from the home, or it can exacerbate other parental

problems, heightening familial conflict until the youth is kicked out or leaves" (p. 162).

Second, compounding their obstacles in reunifying with biological families, sexual minority youth are at enhanced risk for placement disruptions, which can be attributable to numerous factors, namely peer victimization within youths' living environments (*Elze, 2014; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Mallon et al., 2002; Sullivan et al., 2001*), stigmatization for their sexual orientation (*ACF, 2011; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Khoury, 2007; Tamar-Mattis, 2005*), and lack of appropriate foster parents who can provide safe, stable, and supportive homes (*Mallon, 2011*). Numerous studies and law reviews have documented the chronic verbal and physical mistreatment many sexual minority youth endure from their peers while in out-of-home care (*Estrada & Marksamer, 2006; Tamar-Mattis, 2005*). Though sexual minority youth are the victims in these situations, they are nonetheless the ones to repeatedly move, in search of a safe out-of-home living arrangement. This may result in placement in more restrictive settings such as congregate care, despite the fact that such a placement is implemented for purposes of personal safety and not for therapeutic reasons (*Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Elze, 2014*).

Further complications ensue for youth as a result of inappropriate placement in institutionalized living arrangements. For instance, placements in restrictive settings are generally for "difficult cases," which inappropriately sweeps sexual minority youth under this label. In turn, such a label could have negative implications for reunification possibilities with families as well as for placements in more family-like settings. Moreover, residing in restrictive settings could result in running away from out-of-home placement and child welfare protection altogether (*Elze, 2014; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Nolan, 2006*). Homelessness, of course, exposes youth to an additional set of risk elements, further hampering early adulthood outcomes (*Nolan, 2006*).

A third factor associated with sexual minority status is the absence of adults who can provide emotional support and acceptance. One consequence of impermanent living situations and/or placement in congregate living is the obstruction of opportunities for youth to develop nurturing and stable relationships with caregivers, staff, potential mentors, and others who are instrumental for both formal and informal delivery of preparation for adulthood (*Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Mallon, 2011; Nolan, 2006*). In addition, staff and caseworkers' interactions with sexual minority youth may range from inadequate to harmful. Some caseworkers and staff may have a cursory understanding of youths' sexual orientation and their personal needs while other staff may actively ostracize them and prevent them from engaging in necessary services (*Nolan, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2001*). Finally, the lack of mentors for all child welfare-involved youth is a recognized challenge (*Renne & Mallon, 2014*); for sexual minority youth, it potentially heightens their troubled trajectories for aging out of the system.

1.3. How do sexual minority youth fare in the transition to adulthood?

Although sexual minority youth share many commonalities with their heterosexual counterparts in that they all are contending with traumatic backgrounds, disrupted childhoods, and impaired interpersonal relationships with adults and caregivers (*Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013*), they also represent a somewhat distinct group. This group has a great deal to manage while involved with child welfare system—unsafe and inconsistent living environments, chronically severed ties with family members, peer victimization, and rejection by those who are assigned to care for them and provide support. These factors may contribute to deficiencies in the quality of care afforded them, resulting in insufficient support for a great number of issues, including attention to the transition into young adulthood. In addition, their time in foster care may hasten the onset of or exacerbate mental health difficulties, further compounding post-transition outcomes. Ultimately, if sexual minority youth face a unique array of challenges while in the child welfare system, what happens to these

¹ It is important to note that at the time the data were collected for this project, the maximum age at which foster youth could remain in the child welfare system was 18 years (California Department of Social Services, 6/1/2015).

youth after they depart the system? At present, very few studies have examined this question, resulting in a paucity of information on this topic (research by Dworsky, 2013 is one notable exception). In this descriptive investigation, we focused on the following two central aims as guides for our inquiry of the MEFYP dataset.

- (1) Do sexual minority youth (who are in the process of aging out or are recent foster care alumni) differ from heterosexual youth (also imminent or recent foster care alumni) on educational attainment, employment, economic wellbeing and homelessness?
- (2) Does sexual orientation relate to the above-mentioned outcomes controlling for youths' demographics, victimization histories, and child welfare experiences?

2. Methods

2.1. Dataset and procedure

This research is based on a secondary analysis of data from the Congressionally mandated Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (MEFYP), a randomized-controlled study designed to assess the effectiveness of four independent living programs in California and Massachusetts. The current investigation utilizes data from the Life Skills Training program (LST) of Los Angeles County.² This program provides life skills instruction and case management to foster youth ages 16 and older. As part of the evaluation project, youth were interviewed at baseline (age 17) and once each year after that (i.e. ages 18 and 19) for a total of three waves of data collection (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

Youth were considered eligible for MEFYP if they were 17 years old, placed in out-of-home care, and deemed appropriate for LST. A total of 482 youth were eligible for inclusion; at baseline, 97% of the eligible youth were interviewed. Of those interviewed at baseline, 91% were interviewed at the first follow-up and 88% were interviewed at the second follow-up. Detailed information about the design and procedures of the MEFYP evaluation can be found in previously published work (see Greenson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson, & Courtney, 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

2.2. Sample

For our study, all youth who participated in the three waves of data collection (i.e. ages 17, 18, and 19) and had valid information on sexual orientation at baseline were included in the analysis ($N = 405$, 84% of the original sample). No differences on gender, race or ethnicity were found between participants and the excluded youth. The final sample consisted of 161 males and 244 females (40.0% and 60.0% respectively). The majority of youth were African American ($N = 180$, 44.4%), followed by Whites ($N = 135$, 33.3%), American-Indians/Alaska Natives ($N = 39$, 9.6%), multiracial ($N = 29$, 7.2%), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander ($N = 8$, 2.0%) and Asian ($N = 1$, .2%) In addition, 175 youth (43.2%), irrespective of race, identified as Hispanic or Latino.

2.3. Measures

In our study, four sets of variables were included in the analysis: (1) demographics and sexual orientation; (2) victimization histories; (3) child welfare experiences; and (4) functional outcomes (i.e. education, employment, economic well-being, and homelessness). Information

about demographics, victimization histories, and child welfare factors was obtained from the baseline interview (age 17); information about outcomes was obtained from the second follow-up interview (age 19). Missing data were present for several variables, resulting in a modest decrease in sample size for some analyses.

2.3.1. Demographics

Gender was coded as either male or female. Ethnic identity was defined as Hispanic or non-Hispanic, and race was defined as either white or non-white (all minority race categories, including "multiracial", were designated as "non-white").

2.3.2. Sexual orientation

Youth were asked to self-identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or "something else". Those who identified as homosexual, bisexual or "something else" were designated as "sexual minority" for the purpose of our study.

2.3.3. Victimization

This variable represented a sum of 16 dichotomous (yes/no) items asking about the ways in which caregivers may have mistreated the youth before their first entry into foster care. Examples included "Did your caregivers often fail to provide regular meals for you so that you had to go hungry or ask other people for food"; "Did any of your caregivers ever throw or push you, for example, push you down a staircase or push you into a wall"; and "Did any of your caregivers ever lock you in a room or closet for several hours or longer".

2.3.4. Sexual abuse

Youth were asked if anyone ever touched or kissed them against their will, or attempted to do so; and if anyone ever had intercourse, oral sex or anal sex with them against their will, or attempted to do so. Youth who responded "yes" to any of these questions were designated as having a history of sexual abuse.

2.3.5. Child welfare experiences

Youth were asked about their current placement types, as well as placement changes, school transitions, and independent living preparation/services received.

2.3.6. Current placement type

Placement type at baseline was coded as: (1) with relatives; (2) non-relative foster home; (3) group home/residential treatment facility; and (4) other setting (e.g. with a friend or roommate, friend's family, homeless shelter).

2.3.7. Placement changes

This variable represented the total number of foster homes, group homes or residential treatment facilities youth lived in since first entering foster care.

2.3.8. School transitions

This variable represented the number of times youths changed schools because their family moved, or because they changed foster care placements.

2.3.9. Independent living preparation/services

This variable was a sum of 21 dichotomous independent living services youth may have received throughout their lifetimes (formally or informally). The services covered five broad domains: (1) leadership development (e.g. involvement in leadership activities, mentoring other youth); (2) educational services (e.g. ACT/SAT preparation, assistance with college applications); (3) employment services (e.g. help with resume writing, assistance with job interviewing skills); (4) financial literacy services (e.g. help on the use of a budget, help balancing a

² We focus on one site only, as there were substantial differences in the ages and other characteristics of youth interviewed at different sites. Specifically, this specific site was selected because it included a large number of youth who have already aged-out of foster care by age 19 (i.e. when information about outcomes of interest was collected). For more information see: http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu/datasets/pdfs_user_guides/161user.pdf

checkbook); and (5) daily living skills (e.g. training on personal hygiene, meal planning and preparation).

2.3.10. Functional outcomes

Four broad outcome domains served as dependent variables in the analyses. As previously noted, information on all outcomes was obtained from the second follow-up interview (i.e. when youth were about 19 years old).

2.3.11. Educational attainment

Youth were asked if they obtained a high school diploma or GED. This variable was dichotomously coded as either “yes” or “no”.

2.3.12. Employment

Youth were asked about their current employment, as well as about past employment experience. A dichotomous variable representing any employment between the ages of 17 and 19 (yes/no) was used as an outcome indicator.

2.3.13. Economic wellbeing

To assess economic wellbeing, youth were asked about their financial assets, financial hardships and receipt of financial assistance. Financial assets included having a checking account, a savings account and a vehicle (each coded yes/no). Financial hardships included experiencing any of the following difficulties in the past year (yes/no): begging for money; making money by recycling cans, bottles or other items; selling blood or plasma; selling personal possessions; and going hungry. In addition, youth were asked how they perceived their own financial situation – response options were “saving a little money each month”, “just getting by”, or “struggling to make it”. Finally, youth were asked about receipt of public financial assistance during the past year, including TANF, WIC benefits, food stamps, SSI, general relief payments or other welfare payments (each coded yes/no). Importantly, most questions pertaining to economic wellbeing were asked only of those youths who were legally emancipated at the time of the second interview (i.e. age 19).

In addition to the above-mentioned indicators, a dichotomous variable representing a relatively stable financial situation was constructed. Youth who had a checking account, who avoided financial hardships and defined their situation as either “saving each month” or “getting by,” and who did not receive public financial assistance, were considered financially stable. In contrast, those who did not have a checking account, who experienced at least one financial hardship, “struggled to make it” financially, or received public assistance, were considered financially unstable. This variable was used as an outcome indicator in multivariate analyses.

2.3.14. Homelessness

Youth were asked if they were currently homeless or resided at a homeless shelter. In addition, they were asked if during the past 12 months they stayed overnight at a hotel, motel or Single Room Occupancy; in a car, truck or some other type of vehicle; or in an abandoned building, on the street, or outside somewhere. Youth who responded “yes” to any of these questions were considered to possess a history of homelessness.

2.4. Analytic strategy

Data analysis was conducted in several steps. First, univariate analyses were performed to describe youths' demographics, victimization histories and child welfare experiences, as well as their functional outcomes at age 19 (i.e. education, employment, economic wellbeing and homelessness). Next, bivariate analyses (i.e. chi-square tests and *t*-tests) were conducted to examine the relationships between youths' sexual orientation and the study variables. At the final step, a series of binary logistic regressions were performed to assess the contribution

of sexual orientation to educational attainment, employment, financial stability and homelessness. In each regression equation, independent variables were entered in four blocks: (1) gender, race and ethnicity; (2) victimization and sexual abuse; (3) placement instability, school transitions and independent living services; and (4) sexual orientation. This order of entry reflected an interest in examining the contribution of sexual orientation over and above possible variations in youths' demographics and prior experiences. All analyses were performed in SPSS version 21.0.

3. Results

3.1. Sample description

About 60% of youths in the present sample were female; 64% were non-white, and 43% were Hispanic. In addition, 20% identified as sexual minority (i.e. homosexual, bisexual or “something else”). Participants had an average of 2.35 victimization experiences prior to entering foster care, and about 34% reported a history of sexual abuse. At baseline (i.e. age 17), over 40% lived with relatives, one-third resided in non-relative foster homes and one-fifth were placed in group homes or residential treatment facilities. Furthermore, participants reported 4.31 different placements (i.e. foster homes, group homes and/or residential treatment facilities) during their stay in foster care, as well as 4.27 school transitions. Finally, an average of 9 independent living services were received by the youth throughout their lifetimes (see Table 1).

By age 19, nearly 60% of youths obtained a high school diploma or GED. Additionally, over 80% obtained some work experience between the ages of 17 and 19. Nevertheless, about 1 in 4 received public financial assistance, 1 in 6 had a history of homelessness and 1 in 3 experienced some financial hardship (i.e. one or more) during the past year. In addition, only half of youths had a checking account, slightly over one-third had a savings account and just over 30% had a vehicle. Overall, merely one-fourth of youths were considered financially stable based on the composite variable described in the Methods section (see Table 2).

3.2. Bivariate differences between heterosexuals and sexual minority youth

Sexual minority youth were not significantly different from heterosexual peers on gender, race and ethnicity, as well as on victimization histories. Nevertheless, a salient trend revealed that they had slightly higher rates of sexual abuse (43.2% versus 31.7%; $\chi^2 = 3.34$, $p = .06$), as well as somewhat different placement types at baseline ($\chi^2 = 7.69$, $p = .053$). Specifically, sexual minority youth were less likely than heterosexuals to reside in non-relative foster homes (25.9% versus 34.3%), and more likely to live in group homes or residential treatment facilities

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Study Sample (N = 405).

Variable	Heterosexuals % or mean (SD)	Sex minorities % or mean (SD)	Overall % or mean (SD)
Demographics			
Female	59.0	65.4	60.2
Non-white	65.4	66.2	63.5
Hispanic	42.0	50.6	43.2
Victimization histories			
Victimization	2.24 (3.17)	2.78 (3.42)	2.35 (3.22)
Sexual abuse	31.7	43.2	33.6
Child welfare experiences			
Baseline placement type			
With relatives	42.9	40.7	42.5
Non-relative foster	34.3	25.9	32.6
Group home/res.	19.1	32.1	21.7
Other setting	3.7	1.2	3.2
# of placements	3.98 (4.40)	5.62 (6.44)	4.31 (4.91)
# of school transitions	4.08 (5.19)	5.05 (4.66)	4.27 (5.10)
# of IL services	9.39 (5.01)	9.06 (4.91)	9.33 (4.99)

Note: Missing data for each variable ranged from 0% to 5%.

Table 2
Bivariate Differences in Youth Functional Outcomes at age 19 (N = 405).

Variable	Heterosexuals %	Sex minorities %	Overall %	χ^2
High school diploma/GED	63.0	43.2	59.0	9.65**
Employment	88.2	73.4	85.3	9.89**
Homelessness	11.7	25.9	14.6	9.38**
Public financial assistance	25.7	45.0	29.4	7.76**
Checking account	54.3	30.4	49.6	13.62***
Savings account	43.7	19.0	38.8	15.24***
Vehicle	33.3	18.8	30.4	5.77*
Financial hardship (≥ 1)	32.1	48.3	35.3	4.87*
"Struggles to make it"	14.9	30.0	17.9	6.49*
Financially stable (composite)	27.6	12.2	24.3	6.70*

Note: Missing data for each variable ranged from 0% to 5% (with the exception of some financial indicators, where missing data was about 25% due to their relevance to emancipated youth only).

All outcome variables were measured in dichotomous form (yes/no).

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

(32.1% versus 19.1%). Furthermore, they tended to report increased number of placements ($M = 5.62$ versus $M = 3.98$; $t = -2.69$, $p < .05$), though no significant differences were found in the number of school transitions or independent living services received (see Table 1).

When outcomes at age 19 were examined, sexual minority youth were less likely than heterosexual youth to obtain a high school diploma or GED (43% versus 63%; $\chi^2 = 9.65$, $p < .01$) and to have employment experience between the ages of 17 and 19 (73% versus 88% respectively; $\chi^2 = 9.89$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, they were more likely to receive public financial assistance (45% versus 26%; $\chi^2 = 7.76$, $p < .01$), and less likely to have a checking account (30% versus 54%; $\chi^2 = 13.62$, $p < .001$), savings account (19% versus 44%; $\chi^2 = 15.24$, $p < .001$) and a vehicle (19% versus 33%; $\chi^2 = 5.77$, $p < .05$). Sexual minority youth were also more likely to experience homelessness (26% versus 12%; $\chi^2 = 9.38$, $p < .01$) and less likely to be financially stable (12% versus 28%, $\chi^2 = 6.70$, $p < .05$) (see Table 2).

Table 3
Logistic Regression Analyses: Associated Characteristics with Outcomes at age 19.

Variable	Diploma/GED (N = 355) OR (CI)	Employment (N = 353) OR (CI)	Homelessness (N = 355) OR (CI)	Financial stability (N = 300) OR (CI)
Gender	1.67* (1.02–2.73)	.85 (.43–1.67)	.73 (.36–1.48)	.93 (.51–1.67)
Race	.91 (.51–1.59)	1.14 (.55–2.37)	.85 (.39–1.85)	.66 (.35–1.26)
Ethnicity	.81 (.47–1.38)	.71 (.35–1.44)	.99 (.47–2.08)	1.75 (.94–3.26)
# Victimization	1.05 (.97–1.14)	1.03 (.93–1.14)	1.13** (1.03–1.24)	1.01 (.92–1.11)
Sexual abuse	1.10 (.64–1.88)	1.03 (.51–2.09)	.88 (.41–1.88)	1.46 (.79–2.70)
# Placements	.94^ (.89–1.00)	.98 (.91–1.06)	1.12*** (1.05–1.20)	.94 (.87–1.02)
# School transitions	.96 (.91–1.01)	1.06 (.96–1.17)	.95 (.88–1.04)	1.00 (.93–1.07)
# IL services	1.09*** (1.04–1.14)	1.10** (1.03–1.18)	.95 (.89–1.02)	1.05^ (.99–1.11)
Sexual orientation	.46** (.26–.80)	.45* (.23–.88)	2.41*** (1.20–4.85)	.41* (.18–.90)

All outcome variables were measured in dichotomous form (yes/no).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$;

^ Trend, $p = .058$.

3.3. Logistic regression analyses: relationship between sexual orientation and outcomes

Table 3 summarizes the results of four logistic regressions examining the relationships between youths' sexual orientation and outcomes at age 19 (i.e. education, employment, financial stability and homelessness). Demographic variables, victimization histories and child welfare experiences were controlled in the analyses. All models were statistically significant and deemed appropriate for the data based on Hosmer and Lemeshov test.

3.3.1. Educational attainment

Sexual minority youth were less than half as likely as heterosexual youth to obtain a high school diploma or GED (OR = .46, $p < .01$), even after controlling for demographics, victimization histories and child welfare experiences. Furthermore, females (OR = 1.67, $p < .05$) and those who received more independent living services (OR = 1.09, $p < .001$) were more likely to obtain a high school diploma/GED. Specifically, being a female increased the likelihood of obtaining a high school diploma or GED by 67%, while each additional independent living service received resulted in about 10% increase. Finally, a strong trend has indicated that placement instability was associated with somewhat lower rates of high school/GED completion (OR = .94, $p = .055$).

3.3.2. Employment

Although the final model (i.e. with four blocks of independent variables) was statistically significant and deemed appropriate for the data, only sexual orientation and receipt of independent living services were associated with having work experience. Identifying as a sexual minority decreased one's likelihood of having work experience by more than 50% (OR = .45, $p < .05$), whereas each additional independent living service received increased such likelihood by 10% (OR = 1.10, $p < .01$). Noteworthy, the contribution of sexual orientation was significant even after controlling for demographics, victimization histories and child welfare experiences (including the receipt of independent living services).

3.3.3. Homelessness

Identifying as a sexual minority emerged as a strong predictor of homelessness (OR = 2.41, $p < .05$), even after controlling for demographic indicators, victimization histories and child welfare experiences. Sexual minority youth were more than twice as likely to experience homelessness as their heterosexual peers. Additionally, increased victimization in youths' original families (OR = 1.13, $p < .01$) and higher placement instability (OR = 1.12, $p < .001$) were associated with experiencing homelessness. Specifically, each additional victimization experience, as well as each additional placement change, increased the likelihood of homelessness by more than 10%.

3.3.4. Financial stability

Sexual orientation was the only statistically significant predictor of financial stability (i.e. having a checking account, avoiding financial hardship and receipt of public assistance, and either "saving each month" or "just getting by") in the final model. Identifying as a sexual minority decreased youths' likelihood of being financially stable by over 50% (OR = .41, $p < .05$) even after other independent variables were controlled. Receipt of more independent living services was associated with higher likelihood of financial stability, though this result failed to reach significance level (OR = 1.05, $p < .058$).

4. Discussion

The goal of this project was to measure sexual minority youths' functional outcomes at age 19, relative to those of their heterosexual peers. The rationale for a detailed focus on sexual minority youth stems from the likelihood that their young adulthood lives may be compromised as a result of factors related to representing a "largely invisible population within child welfare systems" (Elze, 2014, p. 160). Moreover, though the state of research on sexual minority youth during their involvement with child welfare is deemed "growing yet still insufficient" (Gallegos et al., 2011, p. 232), research on their lives immediately following emancipation is virtually non-existent. Our intention with this study was to address some of this informational vacuum. From a policy perspective, our study is informed by both the Chafee Act and the Children's Bureau 2011 Information Memorandum, with their respective emphasis on the expansion of independent living services and the need for best practices in attending to the needs of sexual minority youth involved with the child welfare system.

Using data from one site of the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (MEFYP) study, our bivariate findings indicate that the deficits for sexual minority youth are noteworthy across all categories of functional outcomes. That is, in comparison to same-age heterosexual peers, this group demonstrates significantly lesser functioning in education, employment, housing stability, and financial matters. Specifically, regarding the financial status of the two groups, sexual minority youth were more likely to experience financial hardships and indicate that they were "struggling to make it." Correspondingly, sexual minority youth were less likely to be "financially stable", and possess checking or savings accounts, and more likely to use public assistance. For related functional well-being indicators, sexual minority youth were less likely to have high school diplomas/GEDs and work experience, and more likely to experience homelessness compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

That the sexual minority youth in our study would experience financial difficulties and homelessness may be at least partially related to their relatively low rates of high school completion. Yet, interestingly, the one indicator in which this group fares the best across all of the outcomes is employment experience. Though the percentage of sexual minority youth with work experience was lower than the percentage of heterosexual youth with work experience, just under three-quarters of the former had at least some experience between the ages of 17 and 19. Nevertheless, we did not measure the length and stability of employment for either group, or the income level derived from it.

Perhaps sexual minority youth are characterized by more unstable work patterns, or lower paying employment, as a result of their lower rates of high school completion. This factor and other related financial indicators could at least partially explain the differential outcomes we observed.

Although quantitative studies on the outcomes of sexual minority youth who are recent foster care alumni are mostly absent from the research literature, we located one recent study that provides some context for our findings. In Dworsky's (2013) research using data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, she explored economic well-being outcomes of LGB youth and heterosexual peers at age 21 years, with 11% of the 591 youth self-identified as LGB. In the results, statistically significant differences were observed on some economic indicators such as use of public assistance and economic hardships. Yet, there were critical divergences from our findings too. For instance, the Midwest study did not uncover any statistical differences between the two groups on items related to education, employment status (excluding financial earnings), and homelessness. While this lack of congruence between our study and the Midwest study on a comparable set of outcomes is perplexing, there are notable distinctions between the studies that can partially explain these discontinuities. Specifically, the larger sample of sexual minority youth in our study, coupled with possible geographic differences in child welfare programming, services for sexual minority youth and general availability of resources, could be influential in this regard. Furthermore, participants in our sample were, on average, two years younger than those reported on in the Midwest study. It is possible that disparities in outcomes in terms of education, employment and housing stability diminish as youth mature.

After ascertaining that between-group differences existed in our study, we set out to examine factors that may be associated with why the sexual minority group was faring worse than their heterosexual counterparts. We conducted multivariate analyses to examine how multiple factors, including placement and abuse history, number of school and living transitions, and sexual orientation affected youths' subsequent functioning. As previously noted, sexual minority youth who are under the auspices of the child welfare system frequently receive unequal, hostile, or inappropriate treatment relative to their heterosexual peers (ACF, 2011; Elze, 2014; Gallegos et al., 2011; Mallon et al., 2002; Nolan, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2001; Tamar-Mattis, 2005). This context underscores how the risks sexual minority youth face potentially influence a cascade of interrelated negative events, giving rise to deficits in services for this group. Of note, the lack of permanency and inconsistent placement settings for this population could lead to a host of parallel challenges ultimately resulting in inadequate preparation for self-sufficiency as young adults (Elze, 2014; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Mallon, 2011; Sullivan et al., 2001). The results from our analytic model, however, indicate that sexual orientation was associated with each category of functional outcomes even when controlling for other important factors. Therefore, sexual orientation was an independent factor that increased the odds of youths' poorer outcomes. According to our data, it is not the youths' lack of permanency in and of itself, but perhaps the challenges associated with these placements that could be at play. For instance, relational difficulties – namely, bullying by peers – may inhibit effective participation in preparatory programs for independent living, as well as in educational settings.

Although some of the systemic and peer relational factors may have played a role in the observed discrepancies in outcomes, it is important to consider other elements that may influence negative outcomes. These include challenges related to histories of abuse, current mental health functioning, and the broader societal treatment of sexual minority youth, who may endure homophobia beyond the child welfare system. It should also be noted that the present sample is predominantly African-American and Hispanic. Only 8.3% of youths were non-Hispanic Whites, much lower than the percentage reported in other studies of foster youth, including the Midwest study (Dworsky, 2013). It is possible that

the combined circumstances of being racial/ethnic minority, as well as sexual minority, negatively affected youths' functioning. This explanation is aligned with existing research pointing to substantial challenges often faced by racial and ethnic minority youth who identify as LGBTQ (Craig, McInroy, Austin, Smith, & Engle, 2012). This points to an area in which future research is greatly needed. Specifically, larger samples are needed to examine possible interactive effects between youths' race/ethnicity and sexual orientation in relation to functional outcomes.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the sample was restricted to a single county in one state, and may not have been representative of all youth in foster care. Second, we examined youth' sexual orientation at baseline only (i.e. when they were age 17) and did not account for possible changes in self-identification in subsequent waves. Third, findings are limited by the attrition of some youth between the baseline (i.e. age 17) and age 19 interview. Furthermore, some questions (e.g. financial outcomes) were asked only of youth who have legally emancipated by age 19, further limiting the sample size available for analysis. Fourth, because there are no commonly accepted guidelines for measuring financial stability among emancipating foster youth, we relied on somewhat subjective definition of this construct in the present study. Finally, factors not included in our analyses may have contributed to variations in outcomes between heterosexuals and sexual minority youth. For instance, we did not examine youths' mental health or involvement in risky behaviors (e.g. substance use) which could have contributed to variations in functional outcomes. We also did not measure variations in the amount of contact with and support from biological family members. Existing research indicates that foster youth tend to reconnect with biological family during the period of transition to adulthood, and often rely on these family members for support and guidance (Courtney, 2009). Sexual minority youth, however, might not have the same opportunities to reconnect with biological family members due their rejection of youths' sexuality. Overall, we are cautious about the findings we report here as we emphasize that we cannot directly ascertain why sexual minority youth manifest more negative outcomes as young adults.

In turn, these limitations lead to avenues for additional research in this topic area. As noted, future studies should examine how factors such as mental and physical health, as well as interpersonal issues related to sexual orientation (lack of concrete support or mentoring), lead to compromised outcomes upon exiting the system. Moreover, the field needs a longitudinal examination – over a substantially greater duration of time – of the independent living outcomes for sexual minority youth so that measurements of functioning could occur across a broader developmental period. It is conceivable that the immediate transitional period is complicated for this group, but this may stabilize over time. If so, examining the factors that contribute to such stabilization is particularly important. Additionally, it is important to examine how youths' sexual orientation may change over time, and how these changes may affect subsequent functioning. Relatedly, the current dataset did not specifically identify transgender youth, thus, research on this vulnerable subgroup is sorely needed. Overall, perspectives directly from sexual minority youths, particularly on how they perceive their own needs and challenges, as well as how their capacity for resilience and positive growth can be furthered, would add immeasurably to this topic. Finally, research on appropriate definitions and measurement strategies for financial stability outcomes among emancipating foster youth could also be beneficial.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this research adds to the literature on the unique risks that sexual minority youth face as imminent or recent graduates of the

child welfare system. Findings may contribute toward developing effective interventions for this vulnerable sub-group of youth, as emphasized by recent federal actions (ACF, 2011). Across all functional indices measured, sexual minority youth had significantly lower outcomes relative to their heterosexual peers. However, more research is needed to examine the factors that influence these unequal outcomes. It is important for future research to identify how and why specific factors interfere with sexual minority youths' preparation for and eventual functioning as young, independent adults.

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