



APSAC Research to Practice Brief

Study Title: Socio-Ecological Predictors of Resilience Development Over Time Among Youth With a History of Maltreatment

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Introduction:

Resilience, generally described as adaption in the face of adversity, was initially examined only within the context of individual-level characteristics. In recent years, research has evolved to incorporate the impact of environmental factors on resilience across several domains of child functioning. While there is a growing body of research examining resilient development in adolescents with a history of maltreatment, it remains unclear whether youth resilient functioning changes over time and what factors predict such change. There are multiple levels of influence concerning resilience in children who have been maltreated, however the intricacies of such influences remain ambiguous and research on changes in resilient functioning over time is limited. In this study, authors analyzed data from the second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW-II) to measure resilience in adolescents involved with the child welfare system and individual-, family-, and community-level predictors of resilience modeled using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Research Questions/Hypothesis:

- (1) What are the prevalence rates of resilience at baseline (Time 1) and 18-month follow up (Time 2) among adolescents involved with the child welfare system?
- (2) To what extent does adolescents' resilience change over time?
- (3) Do socio-ecological (individual-, family-, and school/community/service-level) predictors relate to changes in adolescents' resilience over time?

Study Sample/Setting:

The sample for this study was 711 adolescents (age 11 or older) who were involved with the child welfare system but were not removed from their home at the time of baseline data collection. Data for this study were collected between March 2008 and September 2012 from 5,872 children between ages 0 and 17.5. Researchers collected at three data time points (baseline, 18 months post-baseline, and 36 months post-baseline), which included information about child welfare investigations, family demographics, service use, children's exposure to violence, and developmental functioning. Data collection involved face to face interviews with children, caregivers and child welfare caseworkers where several instruments were administered to measure resilience and predictor variables. The predictor variables consisted of age, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, exposure

to violence in the home, parent-child relationship quality, out-of-home placement, deviant peer affiliation, neighborhood safety, and receipt of behavioral health services.

Resilience was measured dichotomously (greater resilience and less resilience) as a construct consisting of four developmental domains: externalizing, internalizing, social and cognitive. The *externalizing domain* included behaviors such as aggression and delinquency. The *internalizing domain* included emotional problems such as depressive symptoms (negative mood, interpersonal problems, ineffectiveness, inability to feel pleasure, and negative self-esteem), anxiety, somatic symptoms, and social withdrawal. The *social domain* included caregiver perception of the child's prosocial skills (cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control) and youth perception of loneliness, peer status, and satisfaction with peer relationships. Finally, the *cognitive domain* consisted of school achievement, disposition of learning and school, reading skills, and math skills.

Findings:

The study findings suggest that resilience among youth with a history of maltreatment is changeable over time, and there are important predictors at the individual, family, and community level that affect these changes.

Almost half of the sample began and remained classified as having "greater resilience", defined as showing some level of competence in all four resilience domains, suggesting many youth in the child welfare system are already resilient. About one-third of adolescents in the sample showed changes in resilience over the 18-month study period (Time 1 to Time 2), suggesting that children who are maltreated are not pre-determined for negative outcomes. Only about 17% of the sample went from having greater resilience to less resilience over the 18-month period.

Consistent with the ecological systems theory, factors across the social ecology were relevant in the development of resilience over time among youth with a history of maltreatment. At the individual level, younger adolescents (11-13) were more likely than older adolescents (14-17) to remain classified as having "greater resilience" or to change over time from having "less resilience" to having "greater resilience". At the family level, a higher quality parent-child relationship was a predictor of improving or maintaining greater resilience over time while physical abuse was identified as a factor which inhibits resilience development. At the community level, neighborhood safety and better community environment was a predictor of resilience at both time points, while affiliation with deviant peers was a predictor of lower resilience at both time points.

Recommendations:

The results from this study indicate that resilience in adolescents with a history of child maltreatment is not fixed and can be impacted by several factors at all levels of the socio-ecological system. Those environmental factors identified as contributors to youth resilience, specifically improved parent-child relationships and positive peer relationships, should be targets of service provision for the child welfare system. At the community level, providing safe spaces for youth

and coordinating helping efforts can provide a safer and stronger community environment in which youth can develop and maintain resilient functioning.

While the individual factors of sex and race/ethnicity did not significantly impact resilience in the current study, future research should continue to explore this relationship, especially considering that racial/ethnic minority youth may lack access to resources that serve as protective factors.

Bottom Line:

While the funding priorities for the child welfare system are centered around child safety, it is critical that increased attention and funding be dedicated to the well-being mandate of the child welfare system. This study provides evidence to suggest that fostering parent-child supports and reinforcing strong peer relationships are crucial in the development and maintenance of resilience for maltreated youth. Support in these areas should continue, even after safety and permanency have been achieved.

Citation: Yoon, S., Maguire-Jack, K., Knox, J., & Ploss, A. (2021). Socio-ecological predictors of resilience development over time among youth with a history of maltreatment. *Child Maltreatment*, 1077559520981151

About the Research to Practice Author:

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