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Title: Paths to self-sufficiency for youth served through the unaccompanied refugee minor foster care program in the United States

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Abstract

Self-sufficiency is a common metric used to assess well-being of adult refugees, but it has not been widely used when looking at integration of young adult refugees and immigrants who arrive to the United States unaccompanied and who are placed in foster care. Yet, for US-born youth aging out of foster care, preparation for adulthood centers on independent living skills. Therefore, this study meets a gap in the literature by investigating self-sufficiency for young adults who have recently discharged from the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) foster care program. This study describes a path analysis model of various outcome measures collected using administrative data from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service's (LIRS) network of URM programs. This study examines associations between self-sufficiency and legal eligibility, length of time in URM foster care, educational attainment, English proficiency level, and employment. Findings show direct and positive relationships between employment, English proficiency, and greater educational attainment, and the dependent variable of self-sufficiency. Additionally, increased months in the URM foster care program positively influence self-sufficiency indirectly through both English proficiency and educational attainment. Results suggest that service providers should consider education, employment, and English language development in their case work with URM to ensure the best chances of preparation for adulthood. Additionally, the limitations of this administrative data set illuminate specific ways in which the agency could improve data collection procedures to better understand client outcomes.

Declarations

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Abstract

Self-sufficiency is a common metric used to assess well-being of adult refugees, but it has not been widely used when looking at young adult refugees or immigrants who arrive to the United States unaccompanied. For youth aging out of foster care, the emphasis on preparation for adulthood centers on independent living skills. This study investigates self-sufficiency for young adults aging out of the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) foster care program using administratively collected data files from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). This study examines associations between self-sufficiency and legal eligibility, length of time in URM foster care, educational attainment, English proficiency level, and employment. Findings show direct and positive relationships between employment ($\beta=0.69, p<0.01$), English proficiency ($\beta=0.09, p<0.01$), and greater educational attainment ($\beta=0.12, p<0.01$), and the dependent variable of self-sufficiency. Additionally, increased months in the URM foster care program positively influence self-sufficiency indirectly through both English proficiency ($\beta=0.02, p<0.01$) and educational attainment ($\beta=0.02, p<0.01$).

Introduction

Much of the recent public conversation about immigrants has focused on the 113,605 unaccompanied children who have entered the United States (US) since 2015 (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR] 2018a) and the family separations at the border in 2018 (Roth et al. 2019). A small subset of these unaccompanied youth will eventually enter the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) Foster Care Program alongside young refugee children entering the US from refugee camps around the world. Each year, the URM program in the US serves about 1,300 unaccompanied refugee and immigrant children (ORR 2018). Yet, little is known about outcomes for children served in the URM programs in the US despite their existence since the 1970s. Therefore, this paper aims to add to the literature base on unaccompanied refugee minors by examining predictors of self-sufficiency for youth aging out of the URM foster care programs.

For youth aging out of the domestic foster care system in the US, there is an emphasis placed on independent living skills, self-reliance, and living independently in preparation for adulthood (United States Department of Health and Human Services n.d.). Likewise, the URM program emphasizes independent living skills training, career and college counseling, and English language training as a means to help youth without family reunification options to prepare for adulthood in the US (ORR 2018). Self-sufficiency is used to assess the well-being of adult refugees, but it has not been widely used when looking at young adult refugees or youth served through the URM program. Yet, as URM exit the foster care program they are expected to be able to thrive in the US without the supports of the foster care agency, or direct family members, indicating that the idea of self-sufficiency is important to examine for this population. Therefore, this study is designed to fill a gap in the literature by examining self-sufficiency

outcomes and its predictors and to spark a conversation around measuring self-sufficiency as an indicator of preparation for adulthood among youth served by the URM foster care program.

Self-sufficiency

Self-sufficiency (also referred to as self-reliance) is a common metric used by The Office of Resettlement (ORR) and The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to measure the success of refugees in the US (Halpern 2008) and is a concept often linked with integration into the host country (Fix, Hooper, & Zong 2017). The emphasis on economic self-sufficiency relates back to a goal of the Refugee Act of 1980 Public Law 96-212 § 42 USC 620, which says each State will, “assist refugees in obtaining the skills which are necessary for economic self-sufficiency, including projects for job training, employment services, day care, professional refresher training, and other recertification services” (p.114). UNHCR provides the following definition for self-reliance:

Self-reliance is the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity. Self-reliance, as a programme approach, refers to developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern, and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance (UNHCR 2005, p. 1).

Self-sufficiency is not easily attained for new immigrants and refugees in the US for a variety of reasons. Refugees face a variety of challenges to achieving economic self-sufficiency, including a transportation, low levels of education, illiteracy, and an inability to speak English (Halpern 2008). Refugee service providers also expressed challenges in achieving self-sufficiency may be due to barriers in the system such as a lack of resources in refugee resettlement agencies (e.g. the need for more qualified staff; high caseloads), harder-to-serve clients (e.g. illiterate; high levels of trauma and torture; disability; significant health problems), and refugee attitudes/expectations such as feelings of entitlement about services received in

resettlement and females not wanting paid employment outside of the home for cultural reasons (Halpern 2008). Factors that influence successful employment for adult refugees include English capabilities, strong social support networks, longer length of stay in the US, and becoming a US citizen (Halpern 2008). Refugees who were literate at arrival to the US are more likely to be employed than refugees without literacy skills (Shaw & Poullin 2015). Sometimes cyclical relationships exist among characteristics such as employment, English skills, and education, such that “education necessitates employment, yet employment requires education” (Schmidt 2017, p.64). Rumbaut and Ima (1988) noted that self-sufficiency cannot be achieved independently of one’s host community and each person’s own experiences of adjustment including poverty, learning the language, transferring occupational skills to the US labor market, and managing family responsibilities each play a role in their ability to achieve self-sufficiency.

Despite the longevity of a mandate and focus around self-sufficiency in resettlement, the concept of self-sufficiency is hard for refugees to achieve and is understudied among young adults, especially those served by foster care agencies. The most recent study found on self-sufficiency specifically for refugee youth was conducted in the 1980s. Self-sufficiency as a measure of refugee success in the US is multilayered and requires examination of multiple factors. Self-sufficiency is also often used as a definition of the level of refugees’ integration and assimilation into their new host community.

The United States URM Program

Unaccompanied refugee children have been resettled to the United States since the 1970s through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) Foster Care Program, which specifically serves foreign-born children who lack parents or caregivers at their point of entry into the US. The URM foster care program is designed to be culturally competent and supportive to the

youth, offering cultural and religious services as well as community linkages to meet the unique needs of foreign-born, unaccompanied children (ORR 2010).

The URM program currently accepts a wide variety of unaccompanied youth with legal eligibility. According to the Refugee Act of 1980, refugees arriving unaccompanied are eligible, and 8 USC 1522(d) explains that refugees who become unaccompanied due to family breakdown in the US are also eligible (ORR 2016). Additionally, according to various US laws, other foreign-born youth are eligible for the URM program once they advance to the respective step in the legal process such as: youth with Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) status (8 USC 1232(d)(4)), victims of human trafficking (22 USC 7105(b)(1)(C)), asylum seekers (8 USC 1158), U status recipients (8 USC 1232(d)(4)) and Cuban/Haitian Entrants (45 CFR 401.2) (ORR, 2016, ORR, 2018; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] 2013). All youth are on a pathway to US citizenship when they enter the URM program and therefore can obtain work visas (USCCB 2013). However, youth who enter the URM foster care program with a trafficking eligibility letter from the Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) sometimes experience longer delays, and some youth are too young to work at time of entry to the US (USCCB 2013). The majority of youth with SIJ status are unaccompanied children (UC) from the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) that have entered the United States from the southern border without proper documentation but have fought a legal case since arrival and are on a pathway to citizenship (ORR 2019; UNHCR 2014; USCCB 2013).

Outcomes for Immigrant/Refugee Children and those Served by the URM Program

The URM program has provided an opportunity for researchers to examine outcomes for migrant and refugee children in the US and to advance the well-being of children. However,

studies related to youth in the URM program have often focused on children from only one nationality, such as studies on Sudanese youth (Luster et al. 2009; Rana et al. 2011) and Eritrean youth (Socha, Mullooly & Jackson 2016) or have been done outside of the US (Wimelius, et al. 2017). Other research focuses specifically on one outcome such as educational attainment (Crea, Hasson, Evans, Berger Cardoso & Underwood 2017; Rana et al. 2011) or employment (Hasson, Crea, Evans & Underwood 2018), or studies with even narrower focuses such as resilience among URMs from Sudan (Carlson, Cacciatore & Klimek 2012). The current study will advance this knowledge by looking at patterns among a variety of outcomes including education, employment, and English language skills for all youth served by the URM foster care program.

Length of stay. With more time in the US, immigrants become more like their native-born peers, including educational attainment, income and earnings, and language skills (Waters & Pineau 2015). Crea and colleagues (2017) found that longer lengths of stay in the URM program were found to be a protective factor for UC, enabling them to achieve higher levels of education. Likewise, Hasson et al. (2018), found that length of time in the URM program was associated with greater odds of being employed full time or part time upon exit of foster care.

Country of origin. Some research has found differences across children's countries of origin. For example, Hasson et al. (2018) found that UC from El Salvador in the URM program had lower odds of being employed at time of discharge. Youth from Guatemala were 90% more likely to exit foster care before completing the 12th grade (Crea et al. 2017). Another study found that youth from Southeast Asia had the lowest levels of self-sufficiency (Rumbaut & Ima 1988).

Educational attainment. Educational attainment is commonly understood to be an important predictor of economic success (Stone 2009), and college graduates tend to earn higher wages than those who have only a high school diploma (Torpey 2012). Advanced education also

helps increase positive employment outcomes for refugees, and more generally education has been found to increase an individual's social capital, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and overall adaptation (Kia-Keating & Ellis 2007; Rossiter & Rossiter 2009). For these reasons, immigrant families often expect that children who attend school in the US will be able to obtain better jobs and help with the economic well-being of the larger family unit (Vongkhamphra, Davis, & Adem 2011). Additionally, education and other supports in life such as religion and peer influence increase the likelihood for youth to seek help and become more self-sufficient and well-rounded (Ellis et al. 2010).

Among UC in the URM program, one study found no statistically significant gender differences in educational attainment, but children from El Salvador were five times more likely to have a high school diploma, and Hondurans were 76% less likely to be enrolled in college than other UC at discharge from the foster care program (Crea et al, 2017). [Removed for peer review] found that while 60% of URM's hoped to earn a graduate degree, only 50% were enrolled in college, suggesting a possible mismatch between expectations and planning for the future. This finding speaks to the struggles that newcomers face upon the reality of living in a new country.

English proficiency. Proficiency in the language of host countries is one indicator of refugee integration and eventual self-sufficiency. Most adult refugees attend English classes in their new communities (Vongkhamphra, Davis, & Adem 2011), but refugees who arrive to the US as children learn English while also learning content in school or through participation social activities (Scanlan 2011). Socha, Mullooly, and Jackson (2016) found that Eritrean URM's were exceptionally motivated when it came to learning English. Regardless, Cranitch (2010) found

that refugee youth experience an adjustment and struggle with English due to large gaps in education and the transition to secondary school environments.

Employment. The US resettlement program focuses largely on employment and self-sufficiency, and therefore the employment gap between refugees and native-born is much smaller in the US than in other countries where the focus of the refugee resettlement programs is on long-term integration (Capps et al. 2015). Hasson et al. (2018) found that longer length of stay in the URM program led to increased odds of employment at discharge, but that youth from the Northern Triangle are less likely to be employed than others in the URM program. Another study found that URM work fewer hours per week and receive lower pay rates as compared to youth exiting from domestic foster care (Removed for peer review). Lamba (2003) found that refugees often use family members and ethnic group ties to assist with the job search and networking, which can be a barrier for URM since many have limited social networks (Removed for peer review).

Research Question and Hypotheses

This study is guided by the research question: What influences do the variables of legal eligibility, gender, length of time in the URM program, educational attainment, English proficiency level, and employment each have on self-sufficiency for UC and refugee youth aging out of the URM foster care program?

Longer lengths of stay have been found to be associated with higher educational attainment for UC (Crea et al. 2017). Immigrant youth tend to develop greater English proficiency over time (Scanlan 2011). It is likely that youth who remain the foster care program longer will have the supports to be able to both learn English and attend school. Therefore, the first hypothesis (H1) is that the length of time spent in the URM program will indirectly

influence self-sufficiency through improved English and educational attainment. People with higher levels of educational attainment have been found to earn higher wages (Stone 2009; Torpey 2012). Therefore, the next hypothesis (H2), is that education will directly influence self-sufficiency. The literature shows that employment influences self-sufficiency (Capps et al. 2015; Halpern 2008). Consequently, the authors hypothesize (H3) that employment will directly influence self-sufficiency for youth in the URM program.

Refugees who speak low levels of English faced the highest rates of underemployment in the US (Batalova, Fix & Bachmeier 2016). Therefore, the next hypothesis (H4), is that English will directly influence self-sufficiency. Crea et al. (2017) found that educational outcomes for UC varied based on their country of birth. Accordingly, the authors hypothesize (H5) that country of origin will indirectly influence self-sufficiency through educational attainment level. Vaquera and Kao (2012) found that immigrant females receive better grades than males. Therefore, the next hypothesis (H6), is that gender will indirectly influence self-sufficiency through level of education. Since a child needs to know English to succeed in US schools (also noting that English skills can improve with more schooling), the last hypothesis (H7) is that these will be correlated.

Methodology

Data Source

This study uses administrative data collected by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), one of the national agencies that contracts with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to administer the URM program. At the time of data collection, LIRS had 12 URM programs across six different states. At discharge from the URM program, the case manager uses their knowledge of the youth to answer

a series of questions about their status and well-being. LIRS shared these data with Boston College School of Social Work (BCSSW), and secondary data analysis was approved through the Institutional Review Board. The URM dataset includes a total of 417 youth who discharged from the URM program in Federal Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017.

In order to maximize the use of available information and account for the large amount of missing data in this administrative dataset, missing data was checked. Across all variables in the analyses there were a total of 49 cases (11.8%) that were missing one or more pieces of information. There were 21 missing cases for self-sufficiency (5.0%), ten missing cases for employment (2.4%), two missing cases for level of education (0.5%) and English (0.5%), as well as one missing for country of origin (0.2%). Additionally, 13 youth (3.1%) were removed from the sample due to lack of a start date for the URM program, and subsequent inability to calculate length of time in care.

Additionally, youth under the age of 18 were dropped from the sample as the concept of being self-sufficient under that age is theoretically challenging (n= 48, 11.5%) and because many of these children left to live with family members. More specifically, the children under 18 who were dropped from the sample included those who reunited with family (n=15, 31.9%), returned to home country (n=14, 29.8%), or were adopted (n=8, 17.0%). The others ran away (n=3, 6.4%), lost eligibility (e.g. failed SIJ case; attained US citizenship) (n=2, 4.3%), or closure reason was missing data (n=6, 12.7%). After using listwise deletion for the aforementioned cases, the final analytic sample includes 347 youth. Sensitivity analyses were conducted using Chi square analyses and t-tests to compare the analytic sample to the full sample for each variable in the model. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups.

Sample

The majority of the youth who exited URM care were male (n=239, 68.9%). At the time of discharge, the age of URM's ranged from 18.0 to 24.0 years with a mean of 20.2 years (SD=1.3). As indicated earlier, youth qualify for the URM program based on their legal status. The majority of the study population (n=196, 56.5%) had entered the program with an I-360¹ and Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). More than one third were refugees (n=118, 34.0%), some were victims of trafficking (n=25, 7.2%), six (1.7%) were asylum seekers, and two youth (0.6%) qualified as a Cuban Haitian Entrants. The majority of youth (n=221, 63.7%) were from the Latin American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and about one third (n=126, 36.3%) were from other regions of the world. A detailed list of countries of origin can be found in Table 1 below.

Table I. Country of Origin (n=347)

Country of Origin	n (%)
Honduras	85 (23.1%)
Guatemala	72 (20.8%)
Mexico	41 (11.8%)
Democratic Republic of Congo	37 (10.7%)
Eritrea	22 (6.3%)
Somalia	19 (5.5%)
El Salvador	16 (4.6%)
Burma	10 (2.9%)
Sudan	6 (1.7%)
Afghanistan	4 (1.2%)
China	3 (0.9%)
Ethiopia	3 (0.9%)
Ghana	3 (0.9%)
Liberia	3 (0.9%)
Nepal	3 (0.9%)
Nigeria	3 (0.9%)

¹ Youth who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected; are residing in the US; are unmarried; are dependent in juvenile court; and are under 21 years of age may be eligible to apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Classification through filing an I-360 Petition with USCIS. If this is approved, youth are eligible to enter the URM program, and may be eligible for a green card in the US. Please see <https://www.uscis.gov/green-card/sij> for more information

Pakistan	3 (0.9%)
Bhutan	2 (0.6%)
Central African Republic	2 (0.6%)
Dominican Republic	2 (0.6%)
Haiti	2 (0.6%)
Kazakhstan	2 (0.6%)
Bangladesh	1 (0.3%)
Cambodia	1 (0.3%)
Ecuador	1 (0.3%)
Guinea	1 (0.3%)
India	1 (0.3%)
Nicaragua	1 (0.3%)
North Korea	1 (0.3%)
Rwanda	1 (0.3%)
Uganda	1 (0.3%)

Measurement

Outcome variable: Self-sufficiency. Caseworkers identified each youth's level of self-sufficiency at discharge from the URM program on an interval scale taking into account the local cost of living, the youth's income, expenses, and housing situation. Response options included: no income, income limits standards of living, income meets basic needs, self-sufficient, or income is beyond enough. Because of small cell sizes for two of the options (income limits standards of living; and income is beyond enough), the variable options were recoded as follows: (1) no income or income limits standards of living, (2) income meets basic needs, and (3) self-sufficient.

Independent variables: Length of time, gender, and legal eligibility. Exogenous variables of interest include length of time in the URM program, gender, and legal eligibility. Length of time in the URM program is measured by the continuous variable, the number of months in URM foster care. Gender is dichotomous, with (0) male and (1) female.

Legal eligibility to enter the URM program was recorded for each youth as described in the sample section above (SIJS, refugees, victims of trafficking, asylum seekers, and Cuban Haitian Entrants). For the purposes of the path analysis and to eliminate small cell sizes, these options were dichotomized. Refugees (0) include youth with legal eligibility as enter the URM program as refugees, asylum seekers, and Cuban-Haitian entrants. Unaccompanied immigrant youth (1) include youth who enter the URM program as SIJS, and victims of human trafficking. This coding scheme was chosen for a few reasons. Refugees and asylum seekers are defined as being forced from their homeland due to persecution, or a significant fear of persecution, based upon their race, religion, political opinion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2019) the difference in their status has to do with where (first country of asylum, or final destination such as the USA) they request this status. The US Refugee Admissions Program provides a refugee with immediate legal status as a refugee, work eligibility (for those of a working age), and social services upon arrival (Refugee Council USA 2017). The benefits provided to an asylee are the same as those provided to refugees, however begin later, once the legal process has reached a certain mark (which is the same mark required to enter the URM program as an asylum seeker). The few youth from Haiti were coded as refugees because Haitian Entrants benefit from the US Refugee Resettlement Program and again receive the same services as refugees (USCIS 2018).

By contrast, most UC from the Northern Triangle arrive to the Southern US border seeking protection from gang violence, poverty and abuse in their home or community, and lack of opportunity in their country of origin (UNHCR 2014) and so their reasons for arrival to the US are slightly different than those of refugees. Secondly, upon arrival to the US, these youth are placed in a care setting and are under the custody of the ORR where their basic needs are met

and they can attend school, but they lack legal status to remain in the US. It is only after some time, and legal assistance that these children (who lack viable family members and who have a strong legal case) may achieve status to enter the URM program (USCCB 2013). Even after they enter the URM program, the legal protections awarded to these children are fewer, and may be revoked as their legal case progresses. Therefore, it was determined by the authors of this paper that the classification of refugee as compared with unaccompanied immigrant child was the best way to dichotomize this variable the path analysis.

Mediators. Our hypotheses included three variables that are both exogenous and endogenous. These include level of educational attainment, level of English proficiency, and employment status.

The youth's highest level of education was recorded by the caseworker as one of six options: enrolled in K-12, received GED, received high school diploma, attending a vocational technology program, attending an associate's degree program, or enrolled in a four-year college. For the purposes of this analysis, the responses were condensed into four options. Therefore, the coding was: (1) K-12, (2) GED or high school diploma, (3) attending a vocational technology program or attending an associate's degree program, and (4) attending a four-year college. The youth's level of English proficiency was rated by the caseworker on a scale on 1 to 5, with (1) being not functional to (5) being fluent.

The data for the employment variable consisted of seven different options including unemployed, no work authorization, not employed due to disability or attending school full time, unable to work, employed part-time, and employed full-time. For the purposes of this analysis, employment status was re-coded into three options: (0) unemployed, (1) employed part time, or (2) employed full time. While the authors acknowledge that being unemployed at the time of the

study due to being a full time student may lead to greater self-sufficiency in the long run, for the purposes of this cross-sectional analysis self-sufficiency (rather than predicting future self-sufficiency) these youth remain in the unemployed category.

Analysis Methods

Stata 14 SE was used to run descriptive statistics to summarize the characteristics of the sample and assess correlations among the variables. LISREL 9_20 Student Version was then used to run the path analysis to test our hypotheses. A path model is a statistical method originally developed by Sewell Wright in the early 1900s that uses correlation coefficients and multiple regression together to test complex relationships among a group of observed variables (Schumacker & Lomax 2016).

A variety of fit statistics were used to assess the model fit. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) which measures the amount of variance and covariance predicted by the matrix should yield a result higher than 0.95 (Hu & Bentler 1999; Schumacker & Lomax 2016). The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) should be between 0.05 to 0.08, taking into account the model complexity such as degrees of freedom and sample size (Schumacker & Lomax 2016). The chi-square test was not used in this study because it is most commonly used as a test of “badness-of-fit” and because the sample size for this study is larger than 200 (Schumacker & Lomax 2016, p. 113). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) compares the fit of a model to that of a null model, and a score greater than 0.9 is preferred (Hu & Bentler 1999). The Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) was used to assess model parsimony, where parsimony is the “number of estimated parameters required to achieve a specific level of model fit”, and a result closer to zero indicates a more parsimonious model (Schumacker & Lomax 2016, p. 116).

The model has direct paths from English proficiency, employment, and education to self-sufficiency. Education and English covary. There are also indirect paths. There is an indirect path from length of time in care to self-sufficiency through English and education. There is also an indirect path from country of origin to self-sufficiency through education. Another indirect path is from gender to self-sufficiency through education as well as an indirect path from length of time in the URM program to self-sufficiency through English proficiency.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The average length of time that youth were in the URM program was 36.9 months (SD=25.3), or approximately three years. The minimum length of stay was 12 days and the longest was just under 13 years (157.7 months). Length of time in the URM program is approximately normally distributed. 126 youth from the sample are coded as refugees, and 221 as unaccompanied immigrant children.

The sample of URM participants is diverse with respect to their individual characteristics. Table 2 shows the educational outcomes, English proficiency, employment status, and perceived self-sufficiency for the youth in the sample. At discharge from the URM program, the majority (n=171, 49.3%) of the youth had not yet graduated from 12th grade, and only 18.4% (n=64) were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program. Almost one third (n=102, 29.4%) of youth were considered fluent in English according to their caseworker at the time of discharge, another 83 youth (23.9%) had intermediate English skills, and 94 youth (27.1%) were able to speak English functionally at an age-appropriate level. Just over one third, 38.0% (n=132), were employed full time, and 25.9% (n=90) were employed part time. Among those who were unemployed (n=125, 36.0%), some youth were unemployed for specific reasons including: unable to work due to

disability (n=4, 1.1%), did not have legal authorization to work in the US (n=4, 1.1%), and those who were enrolled in school full time (n=12, 3.5%).

At discharge from the URM foster care program, the youth were approximately evenly split between the three levels of self-sufficiency. While some were self-sufficient (n=118, 34.0%), some had an income that met their basic needs (n=105, 30.3%) and the remaining third had no income or an income that limited their standards of living (n=124, 35.7%).

Table II. Sample Characteristics (n=347)

	Range	n (%) / Mean (SD)
<i>Months in URM program</i>	(0.4, 157.73)	36.9 (25.3)
<i>Origin</i>		
Refugee (0)		126 (36.3)
Unaccompanied immigrant youth (1)		221 (63.7%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male (0)		239 (68.9%)
Female (1)		108 (31.1%)
<i>English</i>	(1, 5)	
Not functional (1)		16 (4.6%)
Minimal English (2)		52 (15.0%)
Functional at age appropriate level (3)		94 (27.1%)
Intermediate (4)		83 (23.9%)
Fluent (5)		102 (29.4%)
<i>Education</i>	(1, 4)	
K-12 (1)		171 (49.3%)
GED or High School Diploma (2)		98 (28.2%)
Vocational Technology or Associates Degree Program (3)		14 (4.0%)
4-year College (4)		64 (18.4%)
<i>Employment</i>	(0, 2)	
Not Employed (0)		125 (36.0%)
Employed Part-time (1)		90 (25.9%)
Employed Full-time (2)		132 (38.0%)
<i>Living Situation</i>		
Living with friends		145 (46.8%)
Living with relatives		82 (26.5%)
Living with former foster family		33 (10.7%)
Living alone		24 (7.7%)
Living in college dorms/JobCorps/Program		24 (7.7%)
Homeless/incarcerated		2 (0.7%)
Administrative Dataset Missing this Data		37 (10.7%)
<i>Self-sufficiency</i>	(1, 3)	

No income/ income limits standards of living (1)	124 (35.7%)
Income meets basic needs (2)	105 (30.3%)
Self-sufficient (3)	118 (34.0%)

Results from Path Analysis

Table 3 shows the Pearson Correlation matrix for the variables included in this analysis. The following pairwise correlations were of particular interest. As hypothesized (H7), there was a positive correlation between English proficiency and level of education ($r = 0.53, p < .001$). There was a positive correlation between length of stay in URM foster care and level of education ($r = 0.47, p < .001$) and between length of stay in URM foster care and English proficiency ($r = 0.48, p < .001$). Most significantly, a high positive correlation ($r = 0.75, p < .001$) was found between employment status and self-sufficiency, which makes sense given that the construct of economic self-sufficiency is heavily influenced by having an income. Negative correlations were found between length of stay in the URM program and being a refugee ($r = -0.45, p < .001$). Schumacker and Lomax (2016) note that multicollinearity is common in path analyses and structural equation models. The variance inflation factor (VIF=1.35) shows minimal multicollinearity (Allison 2012; Field 2009).

Table III. Correlation matrix for variables (n=347)

	Gender	Country of Origin	Months in URM	English	Education	Employment	Self-sufficiency
Female	1.00						
UC	-0.11**	1.00					
Months in URM	0.03	-0.45***	1.00				
English	0.05	-0.28***	0.48***	1.00			
Education	0.05	-0.38***	0.47***	0.53***	1.00		
Employment	-0.18***	0.03	0.26***	0.19***	0.12**	1.00	
Self-sufficiency	-0.10	-0.09	0.34***	0.39***	0.34***	0.75***	1.00

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Our first hypothesis (H1) was that the length of time in the URM program would indirectly influence self-sufficiency through improved English and educational attainment, and this is supported by the data in our analytic sample. The two independent paths (1) months in the URM foster care program to English proficiency to self-sufficiency and (2) length of time in URM to educational attainment to self-sufficiency, were separated, and both were statically significant. Results show that the indirect path from months in the URM program to English to self-sufficiency ($\beta = 0.0021, p < 0.01$) contributes less than one percent of the variance in self-sufficiency. The path from length of time to education to self-sufficiency has a similarly small effect ($\beta = 0.0019, p < 0.01$). The indirect effect from months in URM care to English proficiency to self-sufficiency was again similar ($\beta = 0.002, p < 0.01$). Table 4 shows the results of the path models.

Our hypotheses that each of the three mediators would directly influence self-sufficiency was supported by the data. Our data suggest a significant effect of education on self-sufficiency (H2) ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$) and suggest an effect of employment on self-sufficiency (H3) ($\beta = 0.69, p < 0.01$). Our fourth hypothesis (H4) was that English would influence self-sufficiency was supported by the data ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.01$). The fifth hypothesis (H5) was that country of origin would indirectly influence self-sufficiency through education ($\beta = -0.09, p < 0.01$). This hypothesis is confirmed. However, the data does not support our hypothesis (H6) that gender would indirectly influence self-sufficiency through education.

Table IV. Unstandardized Maximum Likelihood Estimates for Total and Indirect Effects on Self-Sufficiency (n=347)

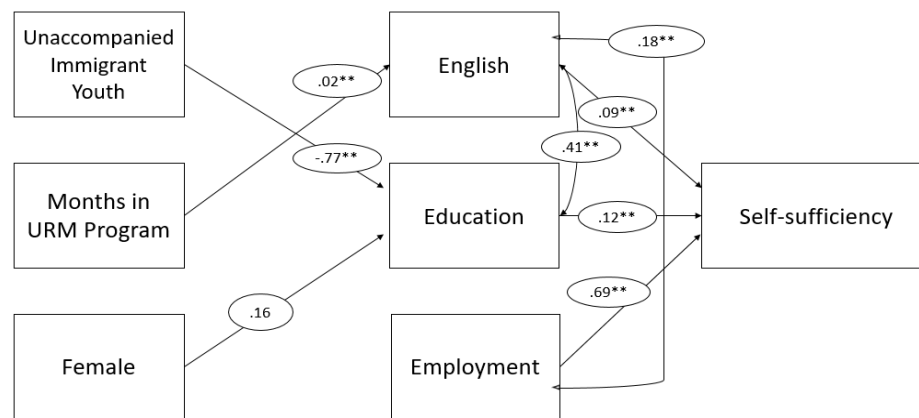
<i>Relationships</i>	Unstandardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error
Months in URM foster care to English	0.02**	0.002
UC to Education	-0.77**	0.11
Education to self-sufficiency	0.12**	0.03
Employment to self-sufficiency	0.69**	0.03
English to self-sufficiency	0.09**	0.03
Female to education	0.16	0.11
English and Education covary	0.41**	0.06
English and Employment covary	0.18**	0.04
<i>Total and Indirect Effects</i>		
Months in URM to English to Self-sufficiency	0.002**	0.000
Female to Education to Self-sufficiency	0.02	0.01
UC to Education to Self-sufficiency	-0.09**	0.02
<i>Fit Statistics</i>		
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.94	
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.138	
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.90	
Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)	3187.590	
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	3257.936	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Overall fit of the model. The results of the model (shown in Figure 1 below) show that most of the paths were significant, apart from the influence of gender on education. The fit statistics were indicators of good fit (GFI= 0.94, CFI=0.90), where the GFI indicates that 99% of the matrix is predicted by the reproduced matrix Σ (Schumacker & Lomax 2016). This model showed that 61% of the variance in self-sufficiency was accounted for by the overall path model. While this is a positive indicator of the overall model, education (12.1%) and English (13.6%) each accounted for relatively small amounts of the variance. The statistics for standardized residuals are all below 2.6 (for a 99% confidence interval) which is good (smallest = 0.0, median = 0.0, and largest = 2.14).

The Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.138 and some researchers suggest that this should be below 0.08 (Browne & Cudeck 1993; Schumacker & Lomax 2016), however, other researchers argue that this an arbitrary cut off and propose other ways of assessing the RMSEA that take into account considerations such as sample size, and degrees freedom (Chen, Curran, Bollen, Kirby & Paxton 2008; MacCallum, Browne, Sugawara, & Appelbaum 1996). More specifically, Browne and Cudeck (1993) state that a RMSEA up to 0.1 indicates a reasonable error of approximation; the lower bound of the confidence interval for this study (0.11) which is marginally over this cut off. Most notably, Chen et al., (2008) argue that RMSEA should be used cautious in applied research settings due to nonnormality of the data and therefore recommend using the RMSEA in conjunction with other goodness of fit statistics; in this study the GFI and CFI were excellent indicators of fit and many of the variables were nonnormally distributed.

Figure I. Unstandardized Estimates for Path Analysis Model



** $p < .01$

Discussion

Few empirical studies have examined predictors of self-sufficiency for unaccompanied immigrant youth. The results of this study suggest that higher levels of education positively influence self-sufficiency. The literature identifies protective factors for refugee youth, including educational resilience, perseverance, and aspirations in the process of adjustment to a new country (Kohli 2011; Kumi-Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Additionally, Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) note that the gaps in children's formal education, lack of cultural competency, and language difficulties all act as barriers not only to receiving education, but also to adapting to society.

In this study, higher levels of English proficiency also positively influence self-sufficiency. This may be due to the perception and racialization of immigrants, and the fact that employers are often more willing to hire someone with greater levels of fluency in the English language. While English is an important aspect of life in the US for immigrants and refugees, and often assumed to be a necessity, Gee, Walsemann and Takeuchi (2010) caution that language should not be used as a proxy for acculturation and or cultural adoption. Many people who reside outside of the US speak English as their first language, and others study English as a second language in their home country; yet language capabilities do not mean that these people would be familiar with US culture or feel comfortable navigating US society.

As expected, employment positively and directly influences self-sufficiency. While employment, pay rate, and number of hours worked each influence a URM's level of self-sufficiency, caseworkers were asked to consider other factors that also influence self-sufficiency such as local cost of living, housing situation, and expenses, including the potential of paying for college tuition versus earning college scholarships when they completed the case closure data for youth in the URM program. The influence of employment on self-sufficiency is supported by

Capps and colleagues (2015) and Halpern (2008) who found that over time refugees were able to integrate into the labor market, whereby earning wages helped them to participate in society. Refugees who are of working age, have greater English proficiency, and whose ethnic communities are already established in the US integrate the best (Capps et al. 2015).

The amount of time a youth spends in the URM foster care program is positively correlated with English proficiency and increased educational attainment, and these findings are consistent with previous research on this population (Crea et al. 2017). While this dataset did not have a variable on length of time in the US, the longer that the URM are in foster care is of course correlated with how long they have lived in the US. However, when thinking about language acquisition, Akresh, Massey, and Frank (2014) argue that length of time spent in the US is not a sufficient measure of language acquisition because exposure to English in home country is an important factor. This issue is especially relevant for the sample of URM in this study, as the unaccompanied youth from the Northern Triangle (UC) typically learn English in ORR's shelter care system where they resided prior to entering URM foster care (ORR 2015) whereas refugee youth arriving from overseas may or may not have learned English in the refugee camp.

The results of the path analysis revealed one link that was not hypothesized by the authors. The data imply that English and employment status should covary, and this link is supported by the literature. Greater English was found to increase the number of employment options for adult refugees (Shaw & Poullin 2015). Additionally, refugees who speak low levels of English were found to face the highest rates of underemployment in the US (Batalova, Fix & Bachmeie, 2016).

This study is one of the few examinations of self-sufficiency for young adults served through the URM program in the past 30 years (Rumbaut & Ima 1988). Service providers aim to prepare all URM with the skills and knowledge needed to survive on their own upon discharge from foster care (USCCB 2013). While self-sufficiency is an important consideration in preparing youth for adulthood, another important factor is financial support and the ability to share daily expenses with others. Our data show that the majority of youth are not living with family members after discharge from URM foster care (as shown in Table 2). While expenses may be shared with friends, this sharing may look different than sharing rent and food with family members. Roberts and Noden (2017) found that among the general population in the US, most young adults living with their parents received some level of ongoing financial support (i.e. food, travel, informal loans and gifted money towards large purchases). Many refugees do not have the same familial supports as US-born young adults given their families' location outside of the US, or their unknown whereabouts.

Young refugees in the US often feel the pressure to send remittance money back to their families overseas (Rumbaut & Ima 1988; Socha, Mullooly, & Jackson 2016). On the other hand, many US-born young adults are able to focus more on education and on advancing their own future because they do not have this same pressure from family. Youth who age-out of the URM foster care program are in need of economic means not only to provide for themselves to live a productive, happy, and meaningful life in the US but also to send money home. Therefore, the authors argue that assessing self-sufficiency for young adult immigrants and refugees aging out of the URM foster care system is relevant and important.

Limitations

This study has limitations. While the data show correlations among our proposed paths to self-sufficiency, other possible measures of self-sufficiency were not included in the analyses. These include health, length of time in the US, and exposure to English language skills prior to arrival. The dataset also did not include any variables around mental health, which is known to be a risk factor for URM (Betancourt et al. 2015; Rana et al. 2011). This study uses administrative data from an agency and standardized measures were not used; therefore, there is unknown reliability and validity. The dataset is cross-sectional and therefore does not allow us to establish causality. The sample only included youth served by the network of LIRS URM foster care programs, which on any given year is between 50%-60% of the total URM population in the US; thus, the findings may not generalize to the remaining youth served by URM programs operated by USCCB. While URM programs exist all over the US, the current analysis did not account for the communities in which the youth live: their policies and openness to immigrants and refugees, as well as the presence of ethnic enclaves. Given the current political climate around immigrants and refugees, this is an important aspect for future research to include.

Implications

Due to the increase in children arriving to the US as unaccompanied immigrants in the last decade, more research is needed in general to ensure that social service providers are delivering the best possible services. A program evaluation is needed on the URM program to better understand the beneficial programmatic aspects such as summer camps, ethnically matched foster homes, newcomer school placements, mentoring, and group versus individual tutoring. More specifically for unaccompanied youth in foster care, research is needed around the concepts of preparation for adulthood (including self-sufficiency) to ensure that youth who age out of foster care are able to be productive members of the community. Future research should

be longitudinal to see how youth develop over time and to understand the predictors of long-term self-sufficiency and success as adults rather than solely preparation for adulthood. For example, it is possible that the benefits of having an education, or being employed over a steady period of time would have greater influence on life over time.

In order to advance the research possibilities, agencies working with URM foster care programs should strongly consider using standardized measures for data collection rather than checklists. Specifically, the authors suggest the use of Child Post Traumatic Symptom Scale (CPSS) (Foa, Treadwell, Johnson, & Feeny 2001) and the Child and Adolescent Support Scale (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, and Gray 2013) which looks at support from parents, friends and social media networks to assess the social support networks of URMs, (however the authors recommend that the questions on parents be repeated twice- once for biological parents, and once for foster parents/current caretakers). Information about income as it relates to poverty level would be better than employment only. Additionally, a wider variety of important variables could be included in existing data collection methods such as exposure to English training and education prior to arrival in the US, length of time in detention or refugee camp, and exposure to trauma. Data about the youth's time in URM care that should be tracked include length of time in the US, ethnically matched foster homes and caseworkers, social supports in the foster care program and beyond, location and emotional support received from biological family, residence in ethnic enclaves and/or welcoming communities, mental and physical health status, and utilization of mentoring and tutoring programs.

Our results show that education, employment, and English are all important factors in promoting the self-sufficiency of young immigrants and refugees exiting foster care. Therefore, service providers should ensure that service planning includes all three of these aspects for every

child. The ways in which these goals can be reached could vary from one youth to the next but might be in the forms of tutoring, after school programs, summer educational programming, ensuring access to English classes beyond those provided by the local school district (such as those offered to adults in the community which can also enhance social networks for URM without family in the US) and job preparation assistance like resume writing workshops, assistance locating open jobs, preparation for job interviews, orientation sessions around norms and expectations of employment in the US, and employment mentors (see Lutheran Services of Georgia 2014 for an example). Some youth come to the US intending to work and send money home (Rumbaut & Ima 1988; Socha, Mullooly, & Jackson 2016). Therefore, service providers should simultaneously encourage school attendance and English classes to increase the odds of long-term economic gain. In order to best advance the self-sufficiency of youth, advocacy can be done to increase funding for both URM programs and the community supports that unaccompanied children need (e.g. tutoring, mentoring) so that more support systems can be put in place for UC and unaccompanied refugee youth.

Conclusion

The literature on self-sufficiency for refugees frequently describes links between self-sufficiency and employment. However, our findings support Halpern (2008), who said that self-sufficiency goes beyond just holding a job. As can be seen from our results, length of time in the URM program, level of English proficiency, and educational attainment were all significant predictors in addition to employment. Similarly, Critelli (2015) found that clients appreciated receiving services after arrival to the US such as ESL, employment services, assistance navigating the school system, and cultural orientation programs. Therefore, some practitioners criticize ORR for not placing more emphasis and funding towards higher education, trade

programs, and credential transfer, all of which could enable skilled refugees to access higher paying jobs, increasing long-term economic gain and mobility (Capps et al. 2015; Fix, Hooper, & Zong 2017), thereby increasing self-sufficiency. With additional research and more funding for services, youth in the US URM program will have greater chances of reaching self-sufficiency and being prepared for adulthood in the US.

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