

BOSTON COLLEGE  
School of Social Work

**HUMAN RIGHTS: WELCOMING UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT AND  
REFUGEE CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES THROUGH COMMUNITY,  
SCHOOL, AND PREPARATION FOR ADULTHOOD**

A dissertation by

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**Dissertation Abstract**

In 2019, 851,508 persons were apprehended at the Southwestern US border without lawful immigration status in the US; of whom 473,682 were part of a family unit, and 76,020 were classified as unaccompanied children (UC). UC are those entering the US under the age of 18 without a parent/legal guardian available to care for them.

Recent research on unaccompanied children in the US has focused on educational outcomes, trauma, family separation at the border, and resiliency. However, more research is needed around this population given their unique vulnerabilities, the current unreceptive political climate in the US, and the fact that 2019 has had the highest arrival numbers yet.

This dissertation draws on administrative data to provide information that can improve the services that social service agencies are delivering, to highlight areas of

future research, and to recommend specific tools for data collection. I aim to advance three areas of research related to the human rights violations and social exclusions experienced by unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children in the US, as well as best practices used by service providers. The three areas are: (1) to understand the systems level facilitators and barriers to adjustment for UC, (2) to understand the challenges to formal education for UC, and the strategies that service providers are using to overcome these challenges, and (3) to examine the predictors of self-sufficiency for unaccompanied immigrants leaving foster care.

The findings presented in this dissertation have multiple implications for policy, practice, research, and social work education. The qualitative studies provide a groundwork from which we can conduct more research in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the promising practices described, and advocate to increase funding and service availability. Through a greater understanding of the benefits and challenges to education for UC in foster care, we can build more inclusive and welcoming school environments, ultimately leading to higher educational attainment. Understanding the predictors of self-sufficiency can help caseworkers to better create service plans, and help agencies to advocate for funding of supplementary programming. Altogether, it is my hope that this knowledge can contribute to supports that help UC to be happier, thrive in school, and become productive members of our community.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

## **Introduction**

This three-paper dissertation is designed to examine three topical areas related to unaccompanied children including (1) macro level factors that aid and inhibit adjustment into US communities, (2) challenges and promising practices in the US educational system, and (3) predictors of self-sufficiency as a measure of preparation for adulthood at discharge from foster care. These areas are all ways in which unaccompanied children in foster care could be marginalized and face violations of their human rights, hindering their adjustment process to the United States. Notably, this dissertation will use both the human rights perspective, and a strengths based approach to highlight protective factors that aid their adjustment into the community, school, or in preparation for adulthood.

This dissertation consists of five chapters. This introduction chapter (Chapter I) provides an overview of (1) descriptive data on migration flows into the United States, (2) a description of the populations of unaccompanied children (UC) and unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) and the migration journeys they undergo, (3) my positionality as a social worker and researcher, (4) the agency partner and (5) overall research aims for the dissertation. Appendix 1A includes key definitions that will be used throughout this dissertation. Chapter II is entitled, “Macro level facilitators and barriers to adjustment for unaccompanied immigrant children in the United States”, and is a qualitative analysis examining the role that the larger community plays in the adjustment process for UC who are living in foster care, including attributes and organizations that aid adjustment, and challenges to adjustment. Chapter III is entitled, “Support strategies: The perspective of service providers on educational challenges and promising practices for unaccompanied immigrant students in the United States”, and is a qualitative analysis aimed at understanding the challenges UC students encounter in the US educational system, as

well as the strategies that schools and other community service providers are employing to meet the needs of UC. Chapter IV is a quantitative analysis of self-sufficiency (which is one marker of preparation for adulthood) for UC and URM in the US, entitled, “Paths to Self-Sufficiency for Youth Served Through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Foster Care Program in the United States.” Chapter 5 provides an overall discussion of the implications and conclusions about the contributions of this dissertation to the literature, including those for practice, research, policy, and social work education.

### **Immigrants in the United States**

The United States is a nation of immigrants. In 2017, there were an estimated 44.5 million immigrants in the US (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2019). Immigrants come to the US each year on a variety of visas including: immediate relative & family sponsored, employer sponsored, religious workers, Iraqi and Afghan translators, Iraqi and Afghans who worked on behalf of the US Government, Diversity Immigrant visa (U.S. Department of State [U.S. DOS], n.d.b), refugees (U.S. Department of State [DOS], n.d.a), asylum seekers (USCIS, 2018a), and persons who enter the US without legal documentation.

Immigrant children and immigrant families come to the US from all over the globe. These families may not look like the traditional two parent household in the US but rather might include extended family or close friends, and sometimes members of the family have varying legal statuses. One in four children in the US are part of an immigrant family, meaning they themselves are an immigrant or they live with at least one foreign-born caretaker (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). The 18 million children living in US based immigrant families are from various parts of the world: Latin



America (61%), Asia (24%), Europe (8%), and Africa (5%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). The majority of children living in immigrant families are American citizens (88%), 7% have another legal status in the US, and the remaining 6% are undocumented (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017).

The US has long been a place of safety for people escaping persecution in other nations. Since 1975, the US has welcomed more than three million refugees through the resettlement programs (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018a; Refugee Processing Center, 2019). In 2017, the US accepted 53,716 refugees and received 49,500 asylum claims from El Salvadorans, 35,300 from Guatemalans, and 28,800 from Hondurans (Refugee Processing Center, 2019; UNHCR, 2018b). However, in 2018 the US accepted a much lower number of only 22,900 refugees (UNHCR, 2018a). This dissertation will focus on young persons who are forced migrants, including unaccompanied refugees and unaccompanied immigrant children, both of whom are explained in more detail below.

### **Populations of Interest in this Dissertation**

This dissertation focuses on unaccompanied children in the US, who are either served through the Long Term Foster Care program or the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program administered by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. In this section I will describe the immigrant youth served by these programs. The table below briefly describes some of the differences between the two foster care programs that serve these children.

Table 1.1 Differences between Long Term and Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Foster Care Programs

Foster Care Program for Unaccompanied Children	LTFC	URM
Legal Status of youth served by this program	Undocumented immigrants	Refugees; or UC that is partially through the immigration application process for: SIJS, Asylum, Trafficking Visa, U visa or Cuban/Haitian Entrants
Age of youth served by foster care program	Youth are eligible until their 18 <sup>th</sup> birthday	Youth are eligible until the age of majority for foster care services in the state in which they reside, typically 18-24 years.
Case Goal	Primary: family reunification. Secondary: legal status to remain in the USA	Primary: family reunification. Secondary: prepare for independent living and self-sufficiency in the USA
Agency with custody of child	Office of Refugee Resettlement	State or County Child Welfare in the district in which the child resides

### **Unaccompanied Children (UC) from the Northern Triangle**

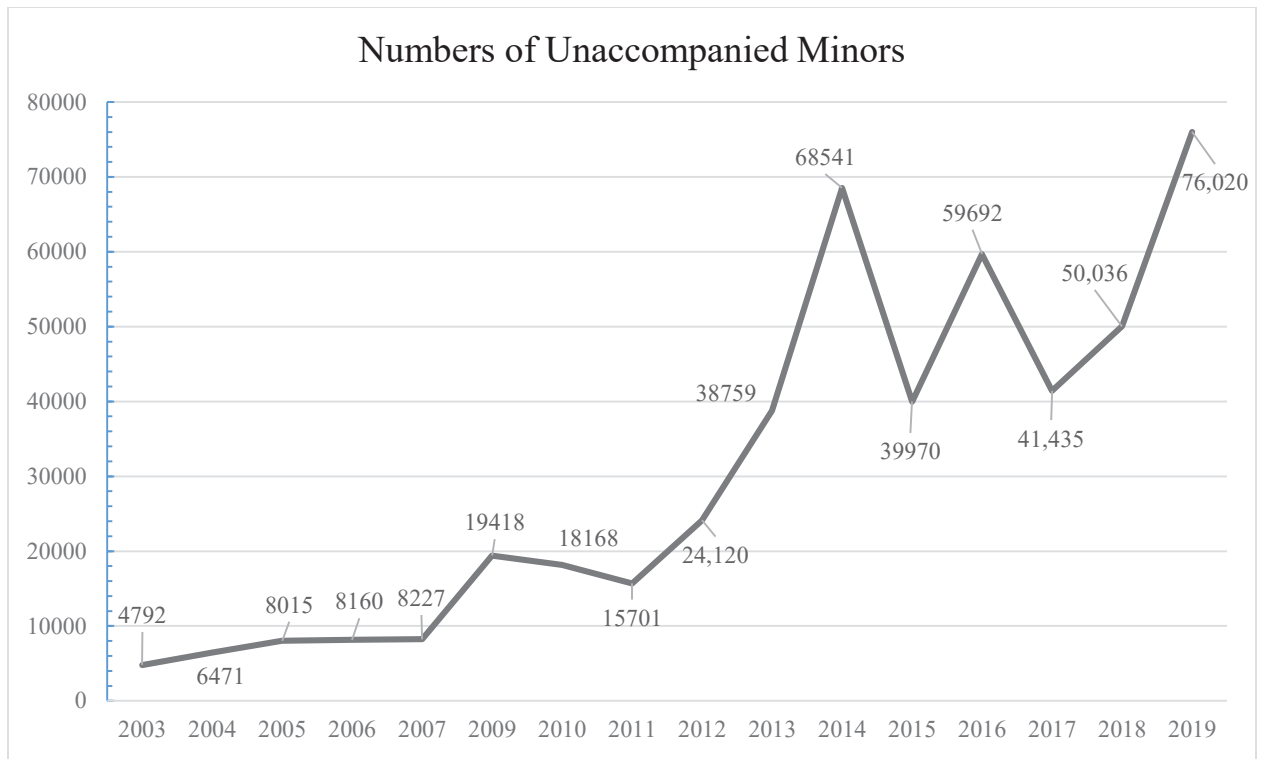
According to 6 U.S.C. § 279 G2, an “unaccompanied alien child”<sup>1</sup> is someone who does not have lawful immigration status in the US, is under 18 years of age, and who has no parent or legal guardian available to provide physical care and custody for the child. The number of UC arriving to the southern border of the US has risen drastically since the early 2000s, with 76,020 UC apprehended in 2019, after some fluctuation over

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation the word “alien” is being removed from the classification of these children in order to restore dignity and worth to the person in accordance with social work values. Therefore, I will hereafter use the term “unaccompanied child”. In some spaces I also use “unaccompanied immigrant child” or “unaccompanied immigrant student” as synonymous for “unaccompanied child.” I acknowledge that this may not be person first language but am trying to stay closer to the governmental terms as the sample for these studies is defined by their eligibility for the government funded programs of LTFC and URM.

the past five years (U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP], 2019). Figure 1.1 below shows the number of UC referred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) for physical care and legal custody between 2004 and 2007 (Congressional Research Service, 2009), and the number of UC apprehended at the Southwest Border from 2009 to 2019 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP], 2016; U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP], 2017; U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP], 2018; CBP, 2019). It should be noted that data from 2008 are unavailable due to changes in reporting and funding that occurred around that time. Across all years, it is expected that the number of UC apprehended at the border is slightly higher than those referred to ORR custody as some youth are subject to “voluntary removal” after screening at the border as part of the special policies for children from contiguous countries (Mexico and Canada) as set out by H.R. 7311 sec. 235. For example, in 2018 there were 50,036 unaccompanied children apprehended at the border (CBP, 2018) yet only 49,100 of these children UC entered ORR care and custody (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2019). The number of unaccompanied minors apprehended in 2019 is the highest yet, showing an increased need to continue research related to this group of vulnerable children.

Figure 1.1 Number of Unaccompanied Minors 2003-2019



Data in this figure are compiled from multiple citations including: Congressional Research Service, 2009; CBP, 2016; CBP, 2017; CBP, 2018; and CBP, 2019.

The majority of UC are fleeing deteriorating conditions and human rights violations in their home countries, such as community and gang violence, intractable poverty, social exclusion, and/or child maltreatment (Schmidt, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014). At the same time, many are seeking to reunify with their family members across the US, to achieve a better education, or to find employment and send remittances home (Schmidt, 2017; UNHCR, 2014). UC have often faced multiple traumatic events during the migration journey, such as physical or sexual abuse, severe neglect, human trafficking, and gang violence (UNHCR, 2014) as they travel by foot, by bus, or on top of trains over a period of weeks or months, in search of safety in the US (Griffin, Son & Shapleigh, 2014). Therefore, the journey itself can a

serious contributor to the toxic stress levels experienced by UC (Derluyn, Mels, & Broekaert, 2009).

Unaccompanied children who are apprehended and lack immigration status in the US enter the care and custody of ORR and are placed into one of 100 shelters operated by child welfare agencies and funded by the ORR (Diebold, Evans & Hornung, 2019; ORR, 2015a). UC are provided food, shelter, education, counseling services, and medical treatment in these shelters (ORR, 2015a). The average length of stay in shelters for UC was 51 days in fiscal year 2017 (Wagner, 2018), and 60 days in 2018 (ORR, 2019). During this time in shelter, UC case managers work to identify a safe home to which the youth can be reunified (ORR, 2015a). The majority of youth are released from shelter to live with family members across the country ( $N=34,815$  of 49,100 apprehensions, 70.9% in 2018) (ORR, 2017; ORR, 2019). About 5-10% of UC are given comprehensive follow-up services in the community after they are released from shelter and reunified in the community (Jani, Underwood, & Ranweiler, 2016). However, a small number of youth without viable family reunification options remain in care and transition into a foster care placement. Foster care placements provide a least restrictive environment where case managers continue to assess family options as well as begin the process of applying for legal status in the US (ORR, 2015a). This dissertation will focus on this subset of UC who enter foster care in the US, as well as unaccompanied refugees who are placed into foster care, discussed in more detail below.

## **Refugees**

Refugees are compelled and/or forced flee their homes due to hardship. Reasons often include persecution or fear of persecution (USCIS, 2018a), discrimination, war,

being forced into the local armed forces, being robbed, being raped, and family members being murdered (Vongkhamphra, Davis, & Adem, 2010). In the process of fleeing, many refugees walk for days on end (Vongkhamphra, Davis, & Adem, 2010) or travel across unsafe oceans (UNHCR, 2018d) in search of a safe place to reside. Upon entering the first country of asylum, many are able to register with UNHCR to apply for a refugee status determination hearing (USCIS, 2018b; U.S. DOS, n.d.a). Screenings are done to assess the person's vulnerability and if they meet the eligibility criteria as a refugee, and includes a prescreening interview, and biographic checks (USCIS, 2018b). During this time, some refugees live in formal camps (UNHCR, 2018c), on the outskirts of encampments (Vongkhamphra, Davis, & Adem, 2010) and others are urban refugees living but struggling to survive in cities and communities where they may have the right to rent property and work, while they wait for case processing and for hope of resettlement to a third country (UNHCR, 2019a). Once granted refugee status a multilateral country decision is made determining if the person can safely return to their home in country of origin, should integrate into the local community where they are, or if they should be resettled to a third country (U.S. DOS, n.d.a; UNHCR, 2003).

For those who resettlement to a third country is the best durable solution, there is a second round of screening that includes biometric checks, an eligibility interview, and security checks (USCIS, 2018b). Next people are approved for travel, whereby medical exams are completed and a domestic resettlement agency is assigned (USCIS, 2018b). At this time a series of security checks are run that are specific to the intended country of resettlement (in our case, the US), so that the US can officially accept the person to the US as a refugee (USCIS, 2018b, p.1). There is then another period of waiting for a travel

date, and in most countries refugees are provided with a pre-departure cultural orientation training (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2019). The average length of time that adults spend in refugee camps from registration to resettlement in a third country is 10.3 years, but this time varies greatly based on residence in an urban or rural camp, and nationality; some have remained as long as 37 years (The World Bank, 2016).

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) funds services for refugees that are implemented immediately upon their arrival to the US. The ‘Reception and Placement program’ provides services all refugees for the first three months that they are in US, including a one-time cash advance which is paid to the resettlement agency and is generally used for rent, furnishings, food, and clothing, agency staff salaries or office space, and other resettlement-related expenses (U.S. DOS, n.d.a). The Office of Refugee Resettlement coordinates and funds case management services through state administered grants with the goal of long term integration. These case management services extend beyond the initial three months including help with finding English classes, cultural orientation, and vocational training and professional recertification, and others as deemed necessary for the long term integration of refugees within the local community (Refugee Council USA, 2019). Refugees are encouraged to seek assistance from other public benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid, and are given help with immigration status and family reunification services (Refugee Council USA, 2019). The Division of Refugee Assistance (part of ORR) also funds states for administering programs such as Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA), Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), and the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program (Refugee Council USA, 2019).

## **Unaccompanied Refugee Minors**

UNHCR is responsible for providing international protection to refugees, and unaccompanied and separated refugee minors (U.S. DOS, n.d.a). The services available in refugee camps, and restrictions around refugees' ability to work, largely depend on the specific location and national laws. For example, some refugee camps offer childcare centers and boarding homes for unaccompanied and separated youth. In other situations, an adult refugee from the same area may take the child in, or a group of teenagers could pool resources and live together in a group (Child Rights International Network, 2019). Other times, unaccompanied and separated refugees may experience homelessness and live on the streets (SOS Children's Villages United Kingdom, 2018; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2013) especially in highly urban locations like Cairo, Egypt or Bangkok, Thailand.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the organization that leads refugee processing around the globe. In refugee camps, if a child under the age of 18 is unaccompanied by a parent or adult willing to care for them, they are labeled as a separated child (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2008). For these children, the refugee process begins while simultaneously trying to locate family members to care for the child (UNHCR, 2008). The Best Interest Assessment (BIA) is used as a tool assess a child upon separation to determine care arrangements while they remain within the UNHCR purview of a camp or urban setting. Then, the Best Interest Determination (BID) is used to determine the most appropriate long term care plan for the child (UNHCR, 2008). When family is not located, and resettlement to a third country (such as the US) is determined as the best plan, these



children are labeled by UNHCR as a “M4: Minors destined for foster care”, also known as an unaccompanied refugee minor (URM) (U.S. Department of State, 2011, p.1).

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors are young persons served by the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) foster care program in the US. The URM program serves foreign-born, unaccompanied children whom have legal eligibility to enter the URM program (legal eligibility statuses are described in more detail in Appendix 1A), where most are either (1) refugees or (2) unaccompanied youth from the Northern Triangle of Central America who have gained legal status after arrival to the US.

When a URM is referred to the US for resettlement, social workers are tasked with finding the best possible living arrangement. In the US, all URM's are resettled through either Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) or The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) (ORR, 2018a). Once youth are far enough in the refugee processing system, they are assigned to one of these agencies and the national staff members work in coordination with one of their 29 affiliate foster care programs across the country (Evans, Pardue-Kim, Crea, Coleman, Diebold, & Underwood, 2019) based upon a variety of considerations. The various child level considerations that are used to make a placement decision include age, nationality, ethnicity, language(s) spoken, religion, health and mental health needs, behavioral needs, intensity of service needs, sexual orientation, geographic proximity to extended family residing in the US, geographic proximity to any potential safety concerns in the US, and educational background (USCCB, 2013). The program level considerations that are included in the placement decision are available capacity,

nationality and language(s) of the foster parents, staff language(s) and expertise, capacity for sibling groups to remain together, local ethnic enclaves, community resources available, program expertise (e.g. substance use), availability of legal service providers, continuum of care options for a youth who may be in need or a step up due to undiagnosed mental health needs, and the time needed in that local district to establish dependency in child welfare court before the child's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (USCCB, 2013). While ethnicity and language of both child and foster parents were mentioned above as placement considerations it should be noted that for the URM population no correlation has been found between youth who were placed into a culturally or linguistically matched foster home, and their counterparts in non-language matched foster homes and their outcomes (USCCB, 2013). Placement options may include basic level foster home, therapeutic foster home, group home, mentor home (homes where the refugee-over age 16- rents a room from a community member who volunteers their time as a mentor but is not licensed as a foster parent), residential treatment centers, or apartment/independent living with other URMs. Most URMs are placed in either foster homes or group homes.

While all of these decisions are being made and a foster family/group home placement is being identified for the child, they remain in the country where they applied for refugee status and await a travel date to the US. This wait generally lasts many months (or years). During this time foster parents and staff can receive additional training as needed to ensure they are prepared to serve this specific child (USCCB, 2013). Travel to the US is generally scheduled a week or two in advance and at that time the US Refugee Resettlement Agency begins to prepare the living arrangement by purchasing

needed furniture, food, and clothing, as well as preparing for the airport arrival, and school enrollment.

The URM program provides services immediately upon arrival to ensure the safety and well-being of the refugee (USCCB, 2013). Basic needs services include safe housing, adequate food, clothing, medical care (available through the refugee medical assistance program), English language training, and legal assistance (ORR, 2015b; ORR, 2018a). Services also include ongoing case management services, mental health services, career and college counseling, educational support (school and educational training vouchers (ETVs) for college), and independent living skills training similar to what youth in other foster care programs receive (ORR, 2018a; USCCB, 2013). URM also have access to recreational, social, religious, and cultural support activities until the young adult leaves foster care, often at the age of majority (18-22 years), as determined by the local jurisdiction (Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 Public Law 106–169, 113; ORR, 2018a; USCCB, 2013).

### **Human Rights Perspective**

This dissertation uses a human rights perspective to highlight the needs and abuses that unaccompanied children face in the United States. It should be noted that they many face human rights violations in their home country, which is often part of the reason they are seeking safety in the US and have chosen to make the journey here. Additionally, many UC face human rights violations during their travel to the US in the various countries they traverse, at the US border, and in our shelter care facilities. However, this dissertation is focusing on unaccompanied children who are living in US communities, through foster care programming.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which was written in 1948, outlines the minimum rights for all people, everywhere<sup>2</sup>. As social workers we would like to assume that all 30 articles should apply to UC, as they are no different than other people. However, the current political and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States, leads many unaccompanied children to experience violations of their human rights. There have been violations documented in terms of UC being held for unjustifiably long periods of time in detention (Hauslohner & Sacchetti, 2019) in violation of Article 9, denied enrollment to school (Booi et al., 2016) in violation of Article 26, treated unfairly and taken advantage of in shelter care facilities (Gonzales, 2018; Gonzales, 2019) in violation of Article 14, and denied medical and mental health care (Krueger, Hargrove, & Jones, 2019) in violation of Article 25. Unfortunately, the Human Rights Watch recently released a report that says the United States has decreased the human rights protections for immigrants (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

### **Positionality**

In this section I will describe my positionality, including work experience with UC and motivations as a researcher with this population. Positionality involves recognizing oneself, your experiences, and your biases when conducting research. In analyzing qualitative data and conducting qualitative research, the positionality of the researcher can have significant influence on the outcome of the analysis because of personal perspectives and ideologies (Kilbourn, 2006). Therefore, it is important to note my past experiences, how they relate to this study, and how it may have influence the

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<sup>2</sup> regardless of their “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (United Nations, 1948, p.2)

coding and analysis of qualitative interviews, as well as the research questions and interpretation for the quantitative study within this dissertation.

Prior to matriculating into the PhD program at Boston College I spent more than seven years working as a social worker at the intersection of child welfare and immigration. I spent two years as a Spanish-speaking caseworker, some of which was spent with foreign-born youth in foster care, and the rest was providing in-home wrap around services to unaccompanied children released from ORR's shelter programs to relatives in the community. Five of those years were spent as a macro social worker at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) (described below as they are the research partner for these studies), managing foster care programs for unaccompanied refugee and immigrant youth. This role included training social workers in the field, ensuring quality assurance of casework, providing technical assistance to staff across the country, developing best practices, grant writing, reporting to the funder (ORR), conducting on-site monitoring to ensure compliance and quality services were being administered, and establishing/monitoring corrective action plans for the foster care agencies as needed.

As part of the on-site monitoring, I conducted focus groups of unaccompanied children in various states to ensure that they were receiving the services they wanted and needed as part of our programming. Through this process, I heard the struggles that unaccompanied immigrant and refugee youth faced when it came to integrating into their host communities and schools. After these sessions with youth, and based on anecdotal stories and experiences, we often made programmatic changes and developed further trainings for service providers. However, as time went on, I began to see the need for

empirical research, and for establishing best practices in the area of social work with unaccompanied minors, which is part of the reason I sought a career change and entered academia. Since being at BC, I have had the pleasure of working with a research team that has been studying a variety of issues concerning unaccompanied children. It is important to me to stay close to the issues and to partner with agencies in an effort to conduct research that is helpful to the social workers on the ground, and to advocate for the human rights of UC in our communities.

Two of the papers in this dissertation utilize interviews that were done in partnership with LIRS, interviewing staff members at their affiliate programs and their partners in the local community, and another is using administrative data collected from all the agencies implementing URM foster care services under LIRS across the US. As a staff member at LIRS, I was the person who created this administrative data set and began its implementation in 2014. Therefore, I am intimately familiar with the content and meaning behind the data fields.

My social work practice experience, relationship with the community agency, and familiarity with the data to be analyzed in this dissertation can provide many benefits. I am able to understand the background, rationale, and context from which the data was drawn at a deeper level than someone with less familiarity into the program. Additionally, in thinking about the implications for practice, I have personal experience with the challenges of service provision to UC and may be able to effectively apply the results to the programs at hand. This will enable me to provide specific and tangible recommendations for policy, research, practice, and social work education.

However, my closeness to the data, children, and agency can also create a biased lens through which I will view data, and an interest in preserving the program integrity from which these UC benefit, and improving the work of social workers on the ground. For example, the mass media contains largely negative sentiments about the agencies which serve UC at the moment, yet I strongly feel that some agencies are doing excellent work to better the lives of UC and therefore often focus on the positives. My experiences are discussed as a means to help ensure the integrity of the data analysis in this dissertation and to provide an overarching reminder to myself of the potential pitfalls as I proceed forward.

While I have spent a number of years working closely with, and on behalf of unaccompanied children, I myself am not an immigrant, nor have I been in the foster care system and therefore I lack the lived experiences of the people I research. As a white middle class researcher working on issues that UC face, I am aware that steps are needed in order to ensure that the observations and reflections in this dissertation are representative of the service providers interviewed, and the clients for whom these services are built. In order to do this, I have triangulated data between the audio and written notes, as well as engaged in an external audit process where current service providers were able to offer input and reactions to help make meaning of the data. Due to the fact that I have not lived the immigrant experience, I understand that this is a limitation in my ability to truly understand and represent the views of unaccompanied children as they adjust to the United States.

The data used in this dissertation originates from LIRS and therefore it is important to provide greater context on the agency, and the partnership with Boston College School of Social Work, in the section below.

### **Agency Partner: Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service**

All three papers in this dissertation were facilitated through a partnership with a national resettlement agency, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). LIRS is one of the largest refugee resettlement agencies in the US, and has welcomed more than 500,00 migrants and refugees to the US over the past 80 years (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service [LIRS], 2018). At LIRS, service and advocacy fall more globally into four categories: protection, stabilization, integration, and The Long Welcome (LIRS, 2018). LIRS leads a national network, providing oversight and grant management to a series of affiliate offices across the country which deliver the direct services to refugees, survivors of torture, asylum seekers, people in immigration detention, and unaccompanied children (LIRS, 2018).

The Children and Family Services Department within LIRS specializes in services to unaccompanied children. This department is responsible for the oversight of multiple programs that benefit UC released from shelter care including: Safe Release and Support, Family Reunification, and Foster Care (transitional, long-term, and URM). The role of LIRS is to serve as a “network backbone” where support is offered to social service agencies across the country through monitoring, technical assistance, training, and funding.

Papers One and Two in this dissertation stem from a series of interviews with service providers contracted by LIRS to provide foster care services to unaccompanied



minors, as well as the local network of service providers in the cities of interest. Paper Three analyzes administrative data provided by caseworkers all across the US and used by LIRS's national staff in quality assurance work.

### **Overall Research Aims and Approach**

As a whole this dissertation is designed to provide a better understanding of a variety of social justice and human rights issues faced by young unaccompanied refugees and immigrants in the US, including the adjustment process into their local community, promising practices in schools, and preparation for adulthood. The analyses in this dissertation include both qualitative and quantitative methods, further discussed in each paper.

Chapter Two explores the aspects of the larger community that assist and constrain unaccompanied children as they adjust to life in the US as teenagers in foster care. Service providers have an obligation to help these children, and this paper will describe the service providers interpretation of how UC adjust or “wander” as they navigate the community from the margins (Park, 1928). This paper also discusses actions that community members can undertake in order to support UC as they face the compounding struggles of being marginalized, lacking a parent, navigating the US, and living in foster care. The research questions are: (1) What aspects of the larger community aid the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care?; and (2) What are the community level barriers to the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care? Analyses are separated by community in which the data collection was done to account for community level differences.

Chapter Three explores challenges to and promising practices for education as they relate to UC in foster care. There is ample research on language adjustment for immigrant students at large (Crea, Lopez, Hasson III, Evans, Palleschi, & Underwood, 2018; Scanlan, 2011; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Szlyk et al., 2019), but less about the social and emotional well-being, especially as it relates specifically to UC who may have arrived to the US under the circumstances of forced migrants. The paper examines the challenges to education for UC in the US as well as initiatives and practices being implemented by school districts and social service providers alike to meet these challenges. The research questions for this paper are: (1) What challenges do unaccompanied children in foster care face as they navigate the educational system in the US?; and (2) What are current strategies being implemented in schools to assist unaccompanied immigrant students? In Chapter Three, data are not disaggregated by research site.

Chapter Four addresses the transition to adulthood, specifically the concept of self-sufficiency, for unaccompanied children aging out of foster care. Preparation for adulthood is an expectation for youth who are preparing to age out of foster care in the US (United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.), and self-sufficiency is the metric used to assess success for refugees in the US (Haplern, 2008). However, for refugee and immigrant youth aging out of the URM program the idea of self-sufficiency has not been widely studied. I statistically examine various paths to self-sufficiency that unaccompanied immigrant and refugee youth experience. The research question of interest is: What influences do each of the variables of, legal eligibility, gender, length of time in the URM program, educational attainment, English proficiency level, and

employment have on self-sufficiency for unaccompanied children aging out of the URM foster care program?

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**CHAPTER II: MACRO LEVEL FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO  
ADJUSTMENT FOR UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE  
UNITED STATES**

## **Abstract**

While there is research about the adjustment of immigrants to a new life in the United States, there is little research on the adjustment process specifically for unaccompanied immigrant children, an increasing and vulnerable group of young people. The current study uses a macro social work lens to examine the community and society level facilitators and barriers that unaccompanied children in foster care encounter as they navigate a new life in the US. The authors analyzed data from 22 focus groups across two communities- one in the Northeast, and one in the Midwest. Results indicate that the major facilitators to community adjustment include the role of community relationships, inter-agency collaborations, welcoming communities, utilizing the community as the host locations to practice skills and engage with US-born persons, access to health and mental healthcare, and the role of the local church. The main barriers to adjustment for UC include barriers to community participation, lack of language skills, a lack of formal training for service providers, and unwelcoming communities. We share implications in terms of practice, policy, and future research.

Keywords: unaccompanied child; immigrant; macro; systems-level; community; adjustment; foster care

## Introduction

There is a plethora of research around the ways in which immigrants adjust to a new life in the United States, yet there is little research on the adjustment process specifically for unaccompanied children, an increasing and vulnerable group of young persons living in our communities. The current study uses a macro social work lens to examine the community and societal level facilitators and barriers that unaccompanied children in foster care encounter as they navigate a new life in the US. We aim to address the varied areas of macro social work including the community and environmental factors that influence a client's life, as well as the policies that enable or hinder community and social participation (Reisch, 2016). We consider how adjustment may look different in two distinct communities, using Cultural Stress Theory to guide our assumptions.

This paper is focused on the adjustment (as opposed to integration<sup>3</sup>, assimilation<sup>4</sup> or acculturation<sup>5</sup>) of unaccompanied children because we are analyzing data from the viewpoint of service providers who are often trained in issues of immigrants' adjustment, and because without speaking to UC themselves it is hard to understand how they might describe their own integration or acculturation process. "Adjustment" is an overarching goal beyond acculturation that includes the dual process of adapting to the host language, attitudes of community members, and personal values of native born persons while also maintaining one's own culture, language, and values (Berry, 1997; Kim, Chen, Wang,

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<sup>3</sup> "Integration" is the bi-directional idea that both immigrants and their local community change through a process of adopting society's norms and values (Schinkel, 2013; Waters & Pineau, 2015) whereby children are involved in their own heritage and cultural practices while also engaging in mainstream society (Berry & Sabatier, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> "Assimilation" includes the idea of leaving one's home culture behind and becoming more similar to native born US persons (Borjas, 1985; Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> "Acculturation" is a process of psychological and cultural adaptation that an immigrant experiences following contact with their new surroundings (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006), focusing largely on issues such as cultural traditions and values, and language proficiency (Zane & Mak, 2003).

Shen, & Orozco-Lapray, 2013). Adjustment is a term widely used in social work- for example when talking about adjustment after a life event, a term most frequently associated with the Life Course Perspective (Hutchinson, 2018) and when assessing client well-being (Clare, Corney, & Cairns, 1984; Walsh & Corcoran, 2011). The term is also commonly used in reference to immigrants who are navigating life in a new country and communicating in the host language (Hutchinson, 2018; Kim et al., 2013; Özdemir & Stattin, 2014). Adjustment is a concept which encompasses ideas such as emotional and physical well-being, social and family development, feelings of comfort in your surroundings, life satisfaction and happiness, and familiarity with a new culture (Hsiao & Schmidt, 2015; Hutchinson, 2018; Neto & Barros, 2007; Schapiro, Gutierrez, Blackshaw, & Chen, 2018) and has included indicators such as depressive symptoms and academic achievement (Kim et al., 2013).

Community level barriers and facilitators to adjustment are important to consider, especially in areas with different immigrant and bilingual populations. Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to ... economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality” (p. 6) which could be interpreted to say that UC should be able to fully participate in their community regardless of their “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (United Nations, 1948, p.2). The United States has decreased the human rights protections available to immigrants in recent years (Human Rights Watch, 2019), and social workers are well situated to make a difference in the lives of these clients as social work is a field built around protecting human rights (International Federation of



Social Workers, 2014; Mapp, McPherson, Androff & Gabel, 2019) and social workers have the skills at both the individual and community level of intervention.

### **Unaccompanied Children from Central America**

Unaccompanied Children (UC) are those who children who were born outside of the United States (US), are under 18 years of age, arrive to the US without a parent or legal guardian able and willing to care for them, and are present without legal status in the US (Homeland Security Act of 2002 Public Law 107–296, 6 U.S.C. § 279; Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2016). UC have immigrated to the United States in increasing numbers since 2011 (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2019); in 2019 for example, 76,020 children who arrived to the United States were categorized as UC and placed into the physical and legal custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) (ORR, 2019; U.S. Customs and Border Protection[CBP], 2017).

The majority of UC migrating to the United States originate from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, sometimes referred to as the Northern Triangle (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014). Most are fleeing deteriorating conditions in their home countries, including community and gang violence and extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2014). At the same time, many come to the United States in search of hope: reunifying with family members, obtaining an education, or better employment opportunities (UNHCR, 2014). However, the migration journey itself can include stressful events such as acts of violence, sexual abuse, or human trafficking (Derluyn, Mels, & Broekaert, 2009; UNHCR, 2014).

Upon apprehension in the United States, most UC are moved from a border patrol station to an immigration detention facility, also known as a shelter, specifically for

children under the age of 18. Because there is no parent present, physical custody of UC lies with the US Department of Health and Human Services, which provides care through a network of shelters, the majority of which are group home settings (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2017). Many of these children arrive alone and have feelings of uncertainty regarding what the future holds, creating anxiety (UNHCR, 2014). While in ORR shelter care, service providers are required to provide for UC's basic needs (food, shelter, and clothing), medical care (mostly consisting of immunizations and assessment depending on their length of time in care), education, and counseling on site (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2015). The policy also states that each child should receive an Individual Service Plan (ISP) which outlines the services they will receive and sets an initial case goal of reunifying with family in the US (ORR, 2016). In spite of existing mandates set out in ORR's policies and procedures (ORR, 2016), shelters often fail to meet these guidelines as evidenced by news stories about UC being neglected or harmed in shelters (Gonzales, 2018; Gonzales, 2019; Krueger, Hargrove, & Jones, 2019). Similar circumstances are found among residential settings for domestic child welfare services (Donnelly & Fortier, 2019; Nájuez, 2019).

The policies that created the shelter care system were developed with the goals of protecting children from harm (H.R. 7311, 2008; *Reno v. Flores*, 1993). However, in the system's current state some unaccompanied youth are being held in detention unjustifiably, for too long (Hauslohner & Sacchetti, 2019), and in violation of Article 9 of the UDHR which says "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile" (p. 3). There are also human rights violations occurring in violation of Article 14 which states, "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from

persecution” (United Nations, 1948, p. 3-4). The current rhetoric in the United States often portrays UC as less than human, undeserving, and unworthy, and Human Rights Watch (2019) asserted that the US was guilty of human rights violations with immigrants seeking safety. Due to recently introduced funding constraints, educational programming, recreational services, and “nonessential services” have been cut from some shelters (Sacchetti, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the needs of UC and to improve systematic practices and policies to aid their well-being and protect their human rights.

Family reunification includes a screening process for assessing the child’s needs and a potential US-based caregiver’s ability to care for the child, with the goal of placing the child in a safe and stable home with the caregiver (ORR, 2015). While the majority of UC exit shelter care and enter the care of family members who are responsible for their well-being and for ensuring they appear for court hearings, this number is slowly decreasing as families are fearful of coming forward and engaging in the screening process due to changes in requirements and policies set in place by the current administration. UC who enter the community remain undocumented for a variety of reasons including the cost of legal services, the absence of legal providers in the geographic area, a lack of cultural sensitivity from attorneys, and decisions made by judges that allow UC to remain in the US (Roth & Grace, 2015). When no caregiver can be identified for the child or if the identified caregivers are deemed unsuitable for placement, the UC may be placed in long-term foster care (LTFC), given they meet all eligibility criteria (ORR, 2015).

In order to be eligible for ORR's LTFC program, the UC must have been placed in shelter care for more than four months, be under the age of 17½ years old, and have been screened for potential legal eligibility to remain in the US through a Special Immigrant Juvenile visa, an asylum claim, or a U-status visa (ORR, 2015). The primary case goal for UC in LTFC is to achieve legal eligibility before 18 years of age in order to remain in the US lawfully. During their time in the LTFC program, UC receive services such as housing (foster home or group home depending on their level of need), education in the local community school, counseling services, independent living skills training, access to vocational education, and acculturation and adaptation services which are provided by staff who are specifically trained to work with foreign-born children (ORR, 2015).

While there is some research available specifically related to unaccompanied children in ORR's Long Term Foster Care programs (Crea, Lopez, Taylor, & Underwood, 2017; Crea et al., 2018; Jani, Underwood, & Ranweiler, 2015), there is much more to be studied related to how best to improve outcomes for this population. The purpose of the current study is gain a deeper understanding of facilitators and barriers to adjustment for unaccompanied children in foster care, with a specific emphasis on the systems level.

### **Adjustment to the United States for Unaccompanied Children**

Existing research on UC served through ORR's foster care programs has been on educational attainment (Crea, Hasson, Evans, Berger Cardoso, & Underwood, 2017), predictors of placement changes in foster care (Crea, Lopez, Taylor, & Underwood, 2017; Crea et al., 2018), employment outcomes (Hasson, Crea, Evans, & Underwood,

2018), and levels of hope after arrival (Jani, Underwood, & Ranweiler, 2015). This literature explains some of the complexities that children face, and overcome, while adjusting to the United States. For example, Crea et al. (2018) highlight the unique needs of UC in foster care as well as promising practices used by social workers and other professionals. This study found that the major needs for UC included stable housing and foster care placements, especially bilingual homes with foster parents who can recognize that cultures vary among countries as well as within countries. Connections within the local community were mentioned as critical because being a new immigrant, the majority of these children had no support outside of their case managers and foster parents (Crea et al., 2018). They found that UC were reluctant to be involved in mental health services and lacked basic knowledge about US customs and independent living skills. Assistance was needed with their immigration cases, finding affordable healthcare, language training and affordable translation/interpretation services, and maintaining a sense of safety (Crea et al., 2018). In order to meet these needs, the authors found that service providers offered a wide range of foster care placement options, access to school, assistance with relationship building and making community connections, as well as individualized case management that addressed the culture, education, health, and mental health needs for each child (Crea et al., 2018).

Roth and Grace (2015) looked at barriers that prevent UC released from ORR's shelters, from integrating successfully into their families in the community. In a cross-sectional study of service providers and the UC they formerly served, Roth and Grace (2015) assessed integration trajectories for youth released from ORR custody and served through community-based supportive services. They explain that many UC come to the

US in order to reunite with their family members who migrated earlier on. While the reunification itself is a moment of extreme relief and happiness, it is also a process of adjustment that the entire family must go through, and that may “unfold gradually over time” (Roth & Grace, 2015, p. 248). They describe other challenges such as learning English, and accessing mental health services, especially in rural areas and new immigrant destinations (Roth & Grace, 2015).

Hope and resilience are commonly discussed in relation to integration and the success that UC have had in the US. The Children’s Hope Scale was used to assess the level of hope among 138 UC who had reunited with family between one and 44 months ago, average 10.43 months (Jani, Underwood, & Ranweiler, 2015). Results show that the mean score of hope was 13.7 and that 75% of the respondents scored above a 16 (when the scales highest possible score was 24), indicating that UC have a lot of hope about their future (Jani, Underwood, & Ranweiler, 2015). A study of 292 UC in shelter care who participated in a psychoeducational group aimed to promote hope and resilience, revealed that the “perilous journey” faced by UC is a predictor of resilience once in the US (Becker Herbst et al., 2018, p. 256). Additionally, the resilience was seen as a way to promote well-being in the areas of access to material resources, creating new relationships, and identity formation (Becker Herbst et al., 2018).

The literature above largely focuses on the individual immigrant child integration into their family and community. Fuente and Herrero (2012), examined macro level facilitators of social integration for Latino children in Spain and found that informal community supports both promote integration and serve as a mediator to the effects of discrimination. Integration is often treated as a linear process in a single direction.

However, we know that integration is a two-way street in which immigrants influence their surroundings, and the surroundings influence the immigrants (Waters & Pineau, 2015). The current study examines how the community at large, as well as a wide variety of service providers and people, help and hinder UC in foster care as they begin to navigate the US. This paper will add to the literature that addresses the macro level factors related to unaccompanied children's adjustment.

### **Methodology**

Using data from focus groups and interviews conducted in 2016, the current study examines how, from the perspective of service providers, the community and people within the community help or hinder the adjustment of UC to the United States. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What aspects of the larger community aid the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care?; and (2) What are the community level barriers to the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care?

### **Sample**

The research team partnered with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), an agency contracted by ORR to provide LTFC services. LIRS provided researchers access to its community based service providers at two large social services agencies operating a LTFC program, one in the Midwest and another in the Northeast. After agreeing to participate in the study, the agencies then enlisted the help of internal staff to recruit participants for focus groups. These staff members reached out to their local networks and invited community partners such as staff from legal and medical clinics, personnel from local schools, and foster parents to participate. UC in the LTFC

program were unable to participate in the study because they are prohibited by ORR from participating in research studies while they are in the legal custody of ORR.

During the spring of 2016, a researcher with considerable research experience on global child welfare conducted a series of focus groups and interviews at each geographic site with foster care staff and community partners. At one agency, the focus groups were conducted on site and required participants to travel in at designated times. At the other site, focus groups were conducted in offices throughout the city in order to ease the burden on the participants. The 22 focus groups ( $n=79$  service providers) were formed according to the job functions of the participants. At each site, focus groups were conducted with (1) senior agency administrators, (2) direct care workers and/or case managers, (3) therapists, (4) foster parents, and (5) community partners including: staff who provide medical services to UC, teachers and staff from the local schools, and/or the attorneys that represent the cases for UC. The majority of the focus groups were conducted at the Midwest agency ( $n=47$  participants, across 13 focus groups), and nine focus groups were conducted at the agency in the Northeast US ( $n=32$  participants).

### **Positionality**

The first author of this paper has a deep passion for advancing the lives of UC, stemming from her extensive social work practice experience with UC. During the time of the focus groups, she was a staff member at LIRS working to administer LTFC programs across the country and was only tangentially involved in the project by reviewing the interview questions. Now that she has taken the role of researcher, the level of knowledge gained from social work practice with UC helps to provide background and context on the situation of both UC and the service providers with whom they work.



Additionally, this knowledge helps to build coherent and specific implications for moving forward as a result of this study. Despite the knowledge gained as a social worker with UC, she is a white US-born woman who has not lived the immigrant experience herself and therefore recognizes that this positionality influences her meaning-making of the data.

### **Data Collection**

Focus groups were used for data collection in this study in order to gain a thorough understanding of the topics discussed across a variety of different service providers. Focus groups allow participants to elaborate on one another, stimulating ideas and reactions from other group members in order to achieve a richer discussion than individual interviews allow (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Using a community-agency engaged research model, the researcher created a semi-structured interview/focus group protocol, and LIRS staff provided multiple rounds of feedback before settling on the final protocol. The nature of the semi-structured focus group protocol encouraged on-the-spot follow-up questions for the various participants. When possible, the same questions were used across the different focus groups however, there were some additional or different questions for each group realizing that the experience and knowledge for each type of participant (eg. caseworker v. medical professional) would vary to some extent. The focus groups and interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each, and the researcher took extensive notes. Afterwards, these notes were checked against the audio by a research assistant. As is common in focus groups, questions were both concurrent and retrospective (Smagorinsky, 2008), asking participants to draw from both their experiences with UC they were working with at that time as well as their historical

knowledge acquired through work with UC in prior months or years. University IRB approved the protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

The first author began the data analysis process by reading all 22 transcripts and listening to the available audio files in an effort to immerse herself in the data. Then an inductive approach was used to open code six interviews/focus groups (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rubin & Babbie, 2017). From this initial coding, the first author created a preliminary list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next, as the third step, the team of coders met to engage in second cycle coding, which included reviewing the preliminary list of codes, the goals of the project, and the research questions in order to appropriately narrow the list of codes (Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Saldaña, 2015). The research team then came together for a consensus-building discussion to help identify the codes to be used for the deductive review of data and to establish a codebook. The first author then assigned each of the five coders to a subset of the 22 transcripts such that two people read and coded each transcript using a deductive approach, assigning codes from the approved codebook to the data as a means to condense and make sense of the data (Creswell, 2013). Research team members coded the first three transcripts, then the first author assessed interrater reliability, and then the research team met to discuss how well the codes were fitting and to discuss ways to clarify and improve the codebook. From this experience, the research team decided to condense a few codes. All transcripts were then formally coded deductively from the revised codebook.

After all transcripts were the coded, the first author assessed the level of interrater reliability, or agreement, among codes for each transcript separately. In order to

calculate inter-rater reliability, the researcher divided the number of times that both coders identified the same theme for each code by the total number of items coded in order to reach a percentage of agreement. If the inter-rater reliability was below the recommended level of 80% (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994) team meetings were held as a benchmarking activity, where coders discussed and reached consensus. The first author tallied all of the codes across the 22 transcripts and created the tables shown in the results section below. LIRS staff were then invited to an external audit meeting to discuss preliminary findings (Morse, 2015) where they had the ability to discuss the findings and how it aligned with what they see in their daily practices. LIRS staff expressed that the main themes found through qualitative analyses reflected accurate barriers and facilitators to adjustment for UC in LTFC programs. Staff offered ideas and context around the themes, as well as possible justifications for the differences in the two different communities; these are represented in the discussion section of this manuscript.

## **Results**

### **Research Question 1: What aspects of the larger community aid the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care?**

The results below are shared within the context of each research question. Many of the questions used during the focus groups were structured to ask about promising practices and strategies that can assist UC in cultural adjustment and integration to the US. It should be noted, as one participant said in a focus group that this adjustment and integration is an ongoing process and struggle, “it’s taken time for them to adjust: a new language, a new family, new food... new everything” which illuminates the fact that different UC referenced in this study were at different stages in their adjustment process

at the time of the interviews. First the authors will discuss the results from the research question, What aspects of the larger community aid the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care? The main themes found in the data that relate to practices for enhancing integration at the community level are the role of community relationships, inter-agency collaborations, welcoming communities, the community as the place for multiple opportunities to occur, access to healthcare, and the role of the church as shown in Table 1.

Table 2.1. Community's Assets that Aid Adjustment for Unaccompanied Children

	Total # Comments	Midwest	New England
Community Relationships	64	35	29
Inter-agency Collaboration	52	26	26
Community as a source of IL practice, employment, and extracurricular opportunity	44	25	19
Access to healthcare	44	24	20
Welcoming Community	40	26	14
Role of the Church	28	20	8

### **Community Relationships**

The most salient asset described by participants in both regions was community relationships. Participants described the important benefits that having a presence and connection in the community can provide for children. One foster care program manager summed up the need for personal relationships well: “[they have] no established roots, our kids don’t have any type of connection with anyone – that’s a big difference [from US born youth in foster care] for sure. I talk to my staff, and say every kid needs six adults that are absolutely crazy about them.” In some instances, they referenced formal

mentoring programs, and others referenced community supports more generally, describing extracurricular activities or access to loose social connections in the community.

**Mentors.** Service providers illustrated how mentors help expose youth to the local community, to try new things they otherwise would not have access to, and to expand their knowledge of US society. Mentors have been known to develop long-term relationships with UC in the program; as one participant noted, mentors “make a great impact because they help them in a way nobody else can, because they’re taking them out into the community to understand this culture; they gain a lot of knowledge.” Another said, “it’s an extra person not [agency] affiliated to talk about issues around culture and community, someone to go out with in the community... [someone] to take them out and have those interactions in the community.” Overall participants felt that formal mentoring programs were beneficial to UC in the LTFC program.

**Other community connections.** Social support and social connections are critical to the success of immigrants in the US. Focus group participants described how the youth made community connections through extra-curricular activities, participation in athletics (soccer and other sports teams, or belonging to a gym), and engaging in art programs. In addition to formal mentoring and extra-curricular activities, many informal social connections were described as key to helping UC adjust to the US including: “support and connections help them feel they have a place in the US and [help them] understand culture.” Another commented about the process of finding these connections: “a lot of the work is connecting them within the communities, with foster parents, with social networks, which also defines future success.” It was also acknowledged that UC need

“people they can trust outside of their mentor, multiple people to provide support.” One participant mentioned that “Connection to adults in community [and] progress towards achieving their goals... are the biggest markers of success” for UC, expressing the value of social capital in the young person’s life.

### **Inter-agency Collaboration**

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants emphasized how positive working partnerships were beneficial to help UC adjust to the US and explore the community. The participants described the importance of communication between various parties such as the foster care agency, foster parents, school, and a variety of community providers to promote well-being for UC at a systems level. Existing structures for communication include stakeholder meetings where “organizations that are directly involved in serving refugees get together quarterly and discuss resources for the population, [and] what they’re doing.” Other partnerships with the foster care agency that were described include the local schools, GED programs, job training programs, technical training centers, the YMCA, churches, local colleges, VERA (the legal service provider for youth in ORR custody), physicians’ offices, and hospitals. A foster parent said “[I] definitely feel part of a multidisciplinary team – healthcare, housing, counseling, [there is] always someone I can call – caseworker, or house leader, or interns” and this importance was emphasized by a community partner who said, “Teamwork is a big thing, daily communications with case managers and foster parents is a must.” Some partnerships provide the benefits of financial and in-kind donations, volunteer or mentor support, or foster parent recruitment. Other partnerships aid the youth and agency volunteers such as “partnership with YMCA that allows mentor[s] and youth free

memberships, which encourages healthy lifestyle and time to spend with their mentor. [We] also have a partnership with sports center to play soccer." Other organizations and partnerships benefit the UC as a place of welcome such as the "[local] Hispanic Center", and it was discussed that "every organization has been really open, and really encouraging" of our kids. From partnerships among service providers, to increased access to leisure activities, collaboration at the organization level was said to be beneficial to UC as they adjust to community.

### **The Community as a Source of Independent Living Practice, Employment, and Extracurricular Opportunity**

Participants discussed the role of the community as a host location for UC to explore and engage. More specifically, they described how the community enables UC to practice the independent living skills discussed in classes and with foster care staff, and how this helps them to become successful adults. For example, one participant said "At first [they are] in survival mode, then they get more laid back, but they are still afraid to do things on their own like take public transportation... we teach them how to do things, show them the bus schedule, foster parents get on the bus with them." A staff member further explained, "we do provide transportation to and from class, but we also encourage them to use public transportation because they need to know how to manage those skills on their own" and another participant said, "a lot of kids take the bus, and had to learn bus system." A foster parent mentioned, "[We] watch them make the phone calls and make the appointment... sit with them and teach them no matter how long it takes" and "show them how to apply for jobs on the internet." There was also discussion about how practicing skills and employment were entangled. For example, one community member

explained that we are “teaching life skills at the restaurant; they are working with people they don’t know.”

Many participants talked about how the community was able to provide job opportunities, internships, apprenticeship programs, and technical schools for UC. Foster care staff members reported that, “we’ve had several speakers about jobs, kids really open their eyes” and that “with older kids we’ll provide them some opportunities to look at different trades that are out there.” A foster care case manager explained that “we have a department that really emphasizes ... companies that are willing to have our kids work for them, and our staff go into companies and learn guidelines and then teach them to the families and youth; without doing that we kind of run into a brick wall” which was followed up by a comment that “local smaller business allows them [to see the] work-to-school connection” and that the community has opportunities to “job shadow to see what the job is like.” However, an attorney countered that “if kids were able to go to vocational school and be able to make money sooner, it may not seem like such a pipe dream. Otherwise they’re in school with younger kids. [We feel] this isn’t what you need, you need a job. So many of them just want to work, they have a lot of debt from coming here.” Because “the kids don’t have work authorization” it was discussed that there is a “difficulty getting people on board to [provide] an internship” and that similarly it is “a challenge to get kids to work from intrinsic, they may feel they’re being used as opposed to learning skills. Making those connections can be challenging” whereas a staff member shared that “with more funds there could be improvement. We have had some successes, but the ability to develop an internship program with a small stipend” is hard.



Lastly, the community is also a source of recreation and enjoyment through activities such as “sports and soccer teams, music, and art programs”, volunteering, and cultural experiences. One participant noted that “kids go to gym and are on club soccer teams” while a foster parent added that they take the UC “to museums, and different activities so they’re learning a new culture without losing their own cultural background.” A case manager mentioned the community service program and that “in the middle of the day we go to the senior citizen’s center [as an opportunity to practice:] how do you communicate?, what’s etiquette?, we get them out in the community to use their language.” Over and over again it was reiterated that one of the main functions of the local community was to be a source into which UC could practice and develop skills in terms of independent living, employment, and leisure activities.

### **Access to Healthcare**

Access to health and mental health care are often referenced in the academic literature as a barrier for UC. While these focus groups did acknowledge the barriers to receiving timely, culturally relevant services in the community, we want to focus on the fact that many also discussed the ways in which the community was positively providing these resources and helping UC to overcome health and mental health challenges. Participants discussed examples of when UC had access to healthcare, mental health services, dental services, contraceptives, and usage of local healthcare clinics. A therapist also discussed the nuances of providing sex education to UC as opposed to US-born teenagers, “Sexual education groups have to be tailored differently – they’ve never been given education, we try to do it with outside agencies but we have to be present and ease into it much more easily. [We address questions like] what is a STD and birth control?

Even a girl with a baby doesn't know what a STD is – sometimes it's mind-blowing, but we really have to fill in the blanks where they didn't get certain psychoeducational topics before" and how the agency is successfully able to navigate these needs.

### **Welcoming Community**

The notion of communities labeling themselves as welcoming to immigrants and refugees has become popular in the last decade. A welcoming community was described as "one that just accepts [UC] for who they are ... and offers them opportunities."

Participants discussed features of welcoming individuals in the community including asking questions, keeping an open mind and open dialogue, and sharing culture with others to spread welcoming sentiments among community members. A foster parent said, "a welcoming community is one that wants to know" and elaborated to say a good community "asks a lot of questions... I was never offended by any question I got." Participants expressed that "some are really welcoming" and that UC "don't need support but [rather] openness... It's necessary to have open dialogue."

Enhancing community education and spreading the idea of welcoming communities was depicted as an existing and promising practice implemented by the foster care agency in order to promote well-being and integration for UC. One foster parent shared the experience of spreading awareness to a neighbor:

"Initially I had a friend in my neighborhood that said you hear on the news that a lot of these kids that are coming are gang members. I said not these kids, if you lived in their circumstances in their home countries, you would come to this country too. Since then, he has had them help make boats; calls them to do yard work or snow removal. He's bent over backwards. I'm afraid there are others in the community that have that first impression. I'm afraid that if you don't know a person, you make a judgment about people from other cultures without any knowledge."

Participants characterized how their communities are receptive and positive towards UC, illustrating that many people in the community are friendly and that support from the governor or other public officials (including the refugee state coordinator) are key to spreading a culture of welcome. But they also specified the need to build cultural competency in others, and the intentional process foster care staff employ to change perceptions. For example, one case manager described the process of expanding services to a new neighborhood. They laid the groundwork and involved the community in the decision to ensure that UC would be adequately served in a new geographic area: “[we] went to meet with the churches, school district, [and] city council, to see how they thought about these kids coming into the community – we had the buy-in from the community first, now everyone welcomes these children.” The two communities in this study describe themselves as welcoming towards UC because of their policies, practices, attitudes, and behaviors towards these young people.

### **Church as a Resource**

Participants noted that “church is a big thing” for UC, and that it is a constant support system for UC. Foster care staff further described this by stating “depending on their religion, wherever they want to go, they can go”, for example “if they’re Muslim we try to keep them connected to their own faith.” One foster parent said, “It plays a huge role, even though they are still experimenting with different religions and churches, that they can reach out to [a] higher power, especially those kids that don’t trust anybody it gives them something to trust and feel comforted by.” Another person mentioned that religion can help provide emotional support, because some kids have an “aversion to therapy, thinking psychiatry is for crazy people. But going to a religious leader is a more

natural resource for struggles." Beyond the interpersonal benefits of religion, it was also noted that churches as an institution help UC to blend-in when there are services tailored to specific groups or languages, overcoming trauma, meeting people, and developing informal social supports. Tangible resources were also described as beneficial, "the churches have adopted our kids, at Christmas time our office is overflowing with gifts for our kids, on birthdays too." While the church is a place of worship, these results highlight that it is also a place of safety and familiarity, and a source of tangible and intangible resources to UC.

**Research Question 2: What are the community level barriers to the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care?**

While the communities in this study provide a multitude of assets and opportunities for UC, they are also filled with challenges. In this section, we discuss the findings in response to the research question, "What are the community level barriers to the adjustment process for unaccompanied children in foster care?" including barriers to community participation, language barriers, training needs for professionals and foster families, and unwelcoming communities as shown below in Table 2.

Table 2.2. Barriers to Adjustment for Unaccompanied Children

	Total # Comments	Midwest	New England
Barriers to community participation	103	66	37
Language barriers	48	34	14
Training needs	33	25	8
Unwelcoming communities	30	20	10

**Barriers to Community Participation**

A common theme throughout the interviews and focus groups stemmed from the multitude of ways in which UC struggle to fully participate in their local communities. The examples that arose include fear and legal needs (described below), among more basic barriers to participation. At a basic level, service providers recounted that UC often face economic struggles due to their age and status as a foster youth, that there is a lack of public transportation in some towns, lack of job training and extracurricular opportunities, as well as a lack of paying jobs. A caseworker described the lack of knowledge around finances and an inability to practice managing finances as a barrier: “The financial part is hard because they’re not allowed to manage [their own] money – they get a clothing allowance which is managed by foster parents with receipts.” There was also discussion around the differences in how youth want to engage with the local community. For example, one caseworker explained, “Each youth has their own tendency – some jump in to new culture, others resist and get mad when someone speaks English to them. [We need to be] meeting them where they are.”

It was also discussed that at times the medical insurance, and more importantly the authorization process provided to UC in the LTFC, created a barrier as some medical providers were unwilling to accept these clients often due to delayed payment processing by ORR. They told of experiences in which youth were seen and treated for a condition, but then ORR did not reimburse the expense because it was not authorized first. Participants described that this dynamic then resulted in the medical provider refusing to see future UC patients, which created a barrier to accessing medical services for UC in the community.

Others described barriers to community participation related to medical needs. For example, some participants discussed the UC's lack of knowledge when it comes to issues such as personal care and dietary needs. For example, a caseworker explained, "from eating to sleeping to hygiene – things that we take for a granted that a teenager would know, our [unaccompanied immigrant] kids sometimes don't." A therapist noted "Their weight – sometimes they come underweight and then gain a lot of weight because of the food they eat and [lack of] nutrition. A lot of girls have stomach issues because of food, and boys have had substance issues and alcohol."

According to the participants, even those UC who are happy to be in the US experience fear on a regular basis. They described the fear that UC face is often due to their undocumented status, while for others it is related their race or language abilities and being labeled an outsider, for some it is a fear for the safety of their family members, or fear of raids happening in the community, and for others it is fear of retaliation from coyotes, or fear of being trafficked. One senior staff member at the foster care agency described the reasons for fear in length:

"It's the trafficking concerns... These kids are coming from corrupt law enforcement and government. The gang piece – they know those gangs reach all the way here, those additional fears that they're going to get connected somehow. Confidentiality is huge, if they're trafficked, helping them create a story – help them be comfortable with basic questions, [there is] no ill intent in asking, people want to help, but it makes kids extremely uncomfortable. Traffickers are out there, even in the churches, all it takes is for one foster parents to slip, or one opportunity to make money, confidentiality cannot be overstated."

Once they are here, the kids are "moving from survival to 'thrival,'" described a direct care worker. Yet a caseworker explained how the larger political climate can impede progress: "Raids are happening, that affects potential reunifications, and it increases fear," and a foster parent elaborated on the day to day fears: "she's 12 and started middle

school, she was really scared the first day. [I told her] you made it all the way from El Salvador, you got this. And when I said that to her, she was like oh, ok.” A foster parent further elaborated that the “fear plays a role in everything they do, some kids give up, they [just] can’t take it anymore.” The lack of legal status was discussed as a barrier to community participation, specifically the implications of having “no SSN or work authorization” in the US and no formal ID card. The fear that UC experience cannot be overstated, especially as it is compounded by fear of lacking legal status in the UC.

A senior manager explained, the “ability to solidify legal status [is critical], we cannot start planning for the future until that’s solidified.” And a case manager described how the legal implications of being undocumented here go farther than racial discrimination and work eligibility, “Even something like playing soccer, they can’t play soccer without legal status because of league regulations.” Regardless of how welcoming and receptive the community is, there are abundant barriers to community participation including struggles with transportation and finances, lack of community resources such as employment opportunities and medical providers, and the restrictions put into place by the foster care agencies and foster parents to protect UC.

## **Language**

A wide variety of participants discussed the commonly cited barrier of struggles that UC encounter in their daily lives, and in their community interactions due to a lack of English language skills. While about 22% of the US population are bilingual (Grosjean, 2018) and about half of people in major cities speak a foreign language (Zeigler & Camarota, 2018), society places a pressure on newcomers, especially young ones, to be able to speak English. This societal pressure is a systems-level challenge that

can be addressed in order to be more welcoming towards unaccompanied children.

However, some participants contradicted this by acknowledging that for some UC, their Spanish language skills were both an asset (ability to be bilingual) and a barrier because it takes longer to learn the complexities of English. Compounding this notion are the UC who do not speak Spanish as a native language, or are learning Spanish as a second language and English as a third simultaneously.

A therapist said, while there is a “core group from same country – keep in mind that just because they’re from the same country doesn’t mean they’re culturally the same. The same goes for foster parents, just because they’re Latinx doesn’t mean they’re all the same – these kids don’t like rice, they like pupusas” which was echoed by a supervisor who said, “we’re recognizing that linguistically similar doesn’t mean culturally similar. And linguistically different doesn’t necessarily mean you have to leave your culture behind.” While children from Central America share many cultural aspects this is a reminder that each community from which the children come is different, and that we need to honor all cultures when helping youth maintain their history. A direct care worker said, “It’s good that we can all speak Spanish in the home, but that hinders them because they don’t learn English as fast as they could have. It takes a long time” and a supervisor noted, “we try to place UC in Spanish-speaking homes but sometimes that impedes their ability to learn English.” These quotes show the extent of complexity that is required to provide meaningful and holistic support to UC.

There was also discussion about the mismatch between UC language skills to that of service providers. For example, it was shared that mental health services are needed in more languages, that the community lacks enough bilingual psychiatrists and mental



health providers, and a lack of translators. A medical provider noted that, “A lot of kids are being seen by specialists that don’t speak Spanish” because, as caseworker explained, “we don’t know of any bilingual psychiatrists, or psych assessments, there are huge waiting list and we need interpreters. It’s the highest need.” Another caseworker said they have been struggling with, “finding quality care because of insurance, and not being able to find bilingual quality services.”

## **Training**

Participants discussed a variety of ways in which the community would benefit from bystander training or more information to help change common practices and perceptions of UC. In addition to lay person trainings, the conversation specifically noted the idea that social service providers who interact with UC could benefit from more training in areas such as: increasing the utilization of trauma-informed practices, normalizing the ideas of integration as a bi-directional process, and providing training to foster care staff and foster parents.

For example, participants talked about the need for a greater understanding of UC among court staff, as it might help them to make more informed decisions. One caseworker said, “In order for youth to pursue SIJS, they need to be adjudicated by the local court, saying they have to be here because of parental maltreatment. The court’s understanding of abuse is changing – not seeing abuse but cultural difference is making it harder.” There is also a notion among the “more experienced referees” that if they are “stricter, we will have less cases” indicating that participants felt some referees were being hard on principle rather than looking at each UC individually. Additionally, there is “pressure for adoption from state and local courts for adoption for younger kids (13 and

younger)” based on the assumption that life in the US is the best option, rather than thoroughly assessing each and every case, and every reunification option. Other pressures from less educated court staff include the notion that UC are the same as other foster kids as witnessed by the comment, “It is similar in the domestic program” and that there is a “push [for] reunification over everything else when the case begins. When it’s been determined that reunification can’t happen, [the second option is] most likely APPLA [Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement] which is different. On the local court end we’re getting pressure to work towards adoption, but ... still have to terminate parental rights if adopted. Sometimes it’s hard to get judges on board with APPLA.” A foster parent recruiter explained that once the case goal changes, “we’re not working towards reunification” which can be harmful to a UC who has family members that arrive to the US at a later date or that overcome the barriers that initially resulted in a denial of placement.

Participants also discussed a desire for more training for mental health providers who do not specialize in serving UC by saying, “For clinicians outside [the agency] who don’t know our kids very well, sometimes it’s hard to have a diagnosis, or have a diagnosis that’s not correct because they don’t take into account the cultural part, behavior might be odd or different and [the UC] might be misdiagnosed” and “In a lot of cultures they’re not allowed to express how they feel with an adult because it’s considered disrespectful. [Therefore] the clinician might think the child has a cognitive problem or delay.” Participants felt that additional training on UC backgrounds, and cultural sensitivity may enable the local mental health providers to better serve UC.

Beyond professional staff, there was also a desire for more training for foster families. One parent said, “It’s just really hard, [even though] we got pretty good training. You could talk all you want, but until the [child is] in your house you don’t really know what it’s like” and then went on to explain that more training may be part of the answer: “Maybe there were a few cultural things that I could have known ahead of time, for instance flushing everything down the toilet. [But] maybe hearing from other parents more would have been helpful.” Foster parents discussed the nuances that come with lack of understanding around plumbing systems in the US and the need for toilet paper, but not other trash to be flushed. Another foster parent countered that these peer to peer meetings do happen, and are helpful: “We do get-togethers with families, and they told me about the toilet paper and flushing the toilet, and that was probably more helpful to me than the regular training. Also the phone being misused and running up the bill, that to me was very very helpful.” The idea of educating the rest of the family was also brought up as a way to ensure that all people living in the home are prepared for the new foster child and the changes that may develop in terms of home dynamics: “one thing that would have been helpful is to have a training for younger siblings, we should have something for them – they take it very personally when the child acts out and I was overwhelmed with the behavior.” However, a caseworker discussed the challenges with training, “we should have a more in depth and meaningful workshops to make sure needs are met, but we don’t have the resources to do it. Greater support [is needed] for foster parents and [clear] expectations of this is what you have to make happen to continue the role.” Overall, participants discussed how training could benefit foster families, mental health providers, court personnel, and the general public.

## Unwelcoming Community

While the presence of a welcoming community was discussed above as a facilitator of adjustment, participants also mentioned people and qualities of unwelcoming communities that served as barriers for UC. These included hostility among community members, discrimination and stigma towards undocumented immigrants, an “oppressive and hostile” community, and unwelcoming court processes.

A caseworker went on to explain that “service providers are the most difficult – hospitals – prejudice that they don’t want to accept our kids, [they are] not receptive to accepting kids’ insurance, and that closes a lot of doors very fast.” A legal service provider commented on struggles in the community as well as the perception of judges:

“It’s very hard for kids to get integrated into the community. Most of the kids are kids of color, the great majority from Central America. It’s difficult to integrate in school system, most have minimal education, some are completely illiterate in own language, plopped into extremely white community and stick out. [They] get profiled, even judges don’t appreciate all the kids of color... Some get in trouble, or run away or shoplift or get involved in gangs or drinking and get arrested. It’s very hard for them to integrate because of how they look and the language.”

Similar to the comments about what constitutes a welcoming community, participants noted that providing more education to the general population can help us to overcome bias and ignorance, and enable communities to be more welcoming. For example, one foster parent mentioned, “part of it starts with us and what we do. If we are afraid, the child will have bad behavior or steal our stuff, they can sense our fear.” Another participant recollected times when people were “asking what disease are they going to bring?” and another person further described, “In regards to community – I think that is general to all refugee population[s] – the community doesn’t know what to do with [the] population, or they have a misperception of race and illegal immigrants, which

sometimes is a barrier even for foster parents.” It was declared that the problem is a “lack of knowledge” and “with education they can change their tune – [for example a] person at church who changed his mind and then became the first family to take a girl from the [UC] group home.” Another participant went on to say, “I wish people knew the situations where these kids are coming from. The stigma around refugees is related to lack of understanding of what the process is and the circumstances in home countries, people are ignorant about what’s happening in other countries, maybe if people knew more the stigma wouldn’t be so strong and give people a more emotional tie to these kids.” It was discussed that when educating and talking to audiences, “The more personalized the story, the more welcome they received” emphasizing that a detailed and personal story will often hit home with those you are educating. By correcting misconceptions around children’s characteristics and behavior, a more educated community may be more willing to help forced migrants.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the variety of community level facilitators and barriers to adjustment for unaccompanied children newly arrived in the US. Hill and colleagues (2017) have underscored the importance of social work students to learn macro skills as part of their MSW program. This article could be used as a tool for students, to illustrate how macro factors influence the daily of clients. In thinking about the larger implications of the study, it is important to note that we focus on two distinct communities in our analyses and that experiences of the individuals within these communities are likely varied.

The most salient theme from the current study acknowledges the significant barriers that UC face when it comes to fully participating in their local communities. Our participants' descriptions of barriers faced by unaccompanied children largely mirror the barriers described in the literature, especially those that stem from a lack of legal status (Chen & Gill, 2015; Thommessen, Corcoran, & Todd, 2015). We also notice that the number of times that barriers were discussed by focus group and interview participants is almost double in the Midwest. New England has communities that are politically progressive (Pew Research Center, 2019), offering ample services to immigrants, including health care (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2019), and state colleges openly welcome undocumented students into their classrooms (University of Massachusetts, 2019). Therefore, we suspect that the barriers in the Midwest are more extensive because of the less welcoming social and political climate.

The importance of community relationships was the most salient theme in terms of protective factors for UC as they adjust to their communities. Mentoring programs are instituted by almost all ORR foster care programs, and the results of this study show that the care providers in our focus groups overwhelmingly support the benefit of these programs for a UC's social integration. This is no surprise given that, for youth in domestic foster care, mentoring programs and social skills training have been found to decrease placement moves and to assist youth in reaching permanency through reunification (Taussig, Culhane, Garrido, & Knudtson, 2012). For youth aging out of foster care, Spencer, Drew, Gowdy and Horn (2018) found that mentoring relationships also helped with future orientation and beliefs about what they could accomplish. More generally, having connections with those in the community may help in a UC's

adjustment in the US. Refugee children who were actively involved in the community, or in mentoring programs, found that these connections were a protective factor in terms of their stress and mental health (Lustig et al., 2004; Markham, 2012). In another study, 70% of the unaccompanied youth interviewed reported having someone to whom they could talk when feeling low, yet among the same sample 60% said they had a hard time depending on others in a time of need (Evans et al., 2019). In the current study, some care providers specifically mention the benefits of mentors with similar cultural backgrounds in helping UC maintain their cultural roots, language, and to explore the local opportunities for culture in their new communities. While there are benefits to cultural mentors, further research would be needed to explore this dynamic. The foster families and other US in the foster program can help build bonds with close friends and family, but relationships with persons in the community can enable UC to advance their social capital through bridges to more distant friends and colleagues or linkages to persons higher up the social ladder (Hutchinson, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, n.d.). These linkages are important when it comes to finding future employment, accessing higher education and other means of achieving success in the US.

Another important theme in our research was the importance of partnership and communication among UC serving agencies. Witesman and Heiss (2017) discuss how nonprofit collaborations can be both beneficial and harmful: beneficial when there are few economic resources and the mission of the programs/agencies is communal; however, they can be harmful to productivity when the goals are not shared. The results of the current study reinforce the importance of collaborations among service providers, especially when the case goals are similar. Such partnerships can help with efficient and

effective referrals for services, cross training opportunities, and in the development of new and tailored programming to meet emerging client needs (Evans, Diebold, & Calvo, 2018; Morland, Duncan, Hoebing, Kirschke, & Schmidt, 2005).

Our results suggest that language barriers pose a problem in two different ways. First, our participants described the perception that UC lack the skills to meaningfully engage in the community around them, and second, that service providers lack the language to assist UC to the best of their abilities. The lack of bilingual service providers is a systems-level issue because there are not enough talented bilingual persons entering the helping professions, perhaps due to barriers such as cost of education and licensing, low pay for some helping professionals, or even legal status and inability to work. However, there are efforts being taken to address this within the field of Social Work, such as the work of the Association of Latina/Latino Social Work Educators (ALLSWE, n.d), the Latinx Leadership Initiative at the Boston College School of Social Work (Boston College, 2019), and the Certificate program in Social Work with Latinos at UC Berkeley's School of Social Welfare (UC Berkeley, 2019).

For youth, the surrounding community provides the venue for many life experiences. DePanfilis and colleagues (2002) note that a major role of the service providers is to ensure that youth know both about, and how to use community resources. While UC go through a semi-structured cultural orientation program and independent living skills training as part of the LTFC program, having the ability to actually go out and practice those skills is the best way to test one's ability and increase one's self confidence. Additionally, since buses and many community spaces are not safe in the country of origin for these youth, it's important for them to explore and develop a sense



of safety in the community. Participants referenced the role that employers play in offering these youth job training and internship opportunities which is critical in light of the findings by Hasson and colleagues (2018) that show UC from the Northern Triangle are less likely to be gainfully employed than UC from other countries. Lastly, it is important to note that ORR mandates access to vocational training as part of their services for UC in LTFC (ORR, 2015), yet, participants expressed that the communities did not have enough vocational program slots to always allow UC to participate, or that legal documents were required for participation, posing a policy barrier for UC.

In general, communities host a wide variety of recreational activities in which UC may choose to participate. Sports were a common theme in the focus groups and participants described athletic opportunities as positive spaces to build confidence, create friendships, and as an outlet for self-expression. Schapiro, Gutierrez, Blackshaw, and Chen (2018) found that 27% of UC said participation in sports helped their adjustment to the US. Soccer has been found to be a facilitator of adjustment by multiple authors (Nathan et al., 2013; USCCB, 2013). Similarly, the group Soccer Without Borders exists in many communities and prides itself on helping immigrant youth with personal growth, inclusion among peers, and achieving both personal and team success through the implementation of soccer programs that minimize cultural, economic, and logistical barriers to participation for immigrant youth (Soccer Without Borders, 2019). The higher level of barriers to community participation in the Midwest could be due to the fact that foster homes are spread over a wide geographic range, whereas in the New England community, the majority of the foster parents live within the bounds of the city, enabling youth to walk and access the bus more easily.

The current study highlights access to physical and mental health care as important community level factors that influence the lives of UC. The existing literature documents the many barriers to mental health services including the lack of bilingual providers, high costs, long waitlists, and the fact that clinicians do not feel they have the capacity needed to serve UC and their families (Marrow, 2011; Roth & Grace, 2015). While our findings agree that there are not enough bilingual and bicultural clinicians or low cost services available, we also see that providers are discussing the promising practices in their communities such as collaboration between foster care workers and medical professionals and tailoring sex education classes specifically to this population as a means to meet the unique needs of UC.

In recent years, there has been a lot of popular media coverage about welcoming communities and the advocacy work done to ensure that municipalities have welcoming policies, or to become sanctuary cities (DeSantis, 2018; Gurnah, 2017; Rodriguez, McDaniel & Ahebee, 2018; Salt Lake County, n.d.). The organization Welcoming America has created tools and a social entrepreneurship model to help organizations and community members achieve these goals (Welcoming America, n.d.), and in September of 2015, under the Obama Administration, the White House's Building Welcoming Communities Campaign was developed to encourage local governments to make a commitment to bettering the lives of immigrants in their communities (Muñoz & Rodriguez, 2016). Findings from Rentfrow and colleagues (2013) suggest that openness around diverse populations is lower in the Midwest than in the Northeast, a finding that is consistent with the current study in regards to unwelcoming communities. Immigrant integration policy at the national level, and the idea of welcoming communities, can be

seen as an intervention to help promote social inclusion for immigrant students (Ham, Yang & Cha, 2017). However, there is still a dearth of research assessing how these welcoming policies, attitudes of community members, and community culture influence the lives of UC. While the findings of our study suggest that welcoming communities are important, more targeted research is needed on this topic.

In our focus groups, participants across multiple disciplines described training to be beneficial. Training is often recommended for service providers working with UC (Evans, Diebold, & Calvo, 2018; Finno-Velasquez & Detlaff, 2018), however it is also part of the service model implemented in both the local foster care agency and from the national Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service organization. Formal trainings for social workers have been found to be effective on client outcomes (Scourfield et al., 2012; Zhang, Wang, Liu, & Chui, 2019), however, Adult Learning Theory suggests the need for training to be transformative with meaningful links to one's work and to involve the body, mind, spirit, and emotions of the learner all at the same time (Merriam, 2008). Therefore, it is important to think about ways in which the content can reach a wide variety of people and be learned and practiced effectively.

This study found faith communities and the institution of the church to be a large facilitator in helping UC to explore and feel comfortable in their communities. This finding is consistent with existing literature that says unaccompanied youth from Eritrea felt that the church was a place to both practice spirituality and also to make connections with other people from their country (Socha, Mullooly, & Jackson, 2016). Persons from the Northern Triangle often describe themselves as Roman Catholic (Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention, 2017), and youth in the US are participating in organized religion in decreasing numbers (Jones, 2019).

### **Cultural Stress Theory**

Cultural stress theory (CST) is useful in the study of cultural adjustment because it recognizes the stress and discrimination that immigrants often experience when adapting to a new culture and community. The main tenets of the theory suggest that immigrants often experience a negative context of reception and a feeling of straddling two cultures; while acknowledging that a variety of protective factors can serve as a buffer to these effects (Romero & Roberts, 2003; Salas-Wright, & Schwartz, 2019). For example, some hypothesize that in countries where the immigrants are more similar to the native population they would experience less discrimination than immigrants in countries where they are more dissimilar in culture (Schwartz et al., 2018). Scholars have also used the theory to help explain the dynamics of well-being among immigrants. Perceptions of few problems in the neighborhood has been associated with higher levels of hope among adolescents (Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2018). Cobb et al. (2019) found that experiences of discrimination were associated with negative psychological well-being and life satisfaction, but that membership and identity in a close ethnic/racial group moderated these relationships.

CST acknowledges the racial and linguistic makeup of the community as one factor that influences discrimination faced by immigrants and that should be taken into account. The current study analyzes data from two mid-sized cities, one in the Northeast and another in the Midwest. The population of the Northeastern city consisted of 21% foreign-born persons, 21% of the population identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and Spanish

was the language other than English spoken most often ( $n > 28,000$ ) (Data USA, n.d). By comparison, the Midwestern city consisted of 10% immigrants, 15% of the population identified as Hispanic/Latino, and while Spanish was again the second most common language, it is for only approximately 19,000 people (Data USA, n.d). ORR tracks the numbers of UC released to sponsors in each state, and again the numbers of UC released to the Northeast are much higher than the Midwest as described in Table 3 below (ORR, 2019).

Table 2.3. Number of UC Released by State (rounded to nearest 50)

	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019
Midwest State	150	150	250
Northeast State	1,100	800	1750

\*Data was not available for the specific city where research was conducted, and the state names are masked for anonymity of service providing agencies in these states  
Data in this table is from ORR, 2019

Cultural Stress Theory has enabled us to begin to compare some of the results found in the Midwest community as compared with those in the New England community. We acknowledge that focus group conversations are fluid in nature and recognize that the sample size of participants between the two cities varied so this section only aims to provide conversation, and possible recommendations for future research.

Among the factors that limit adjustment for UC found in this study, barriers to community participation and language barriers in particular were the most starkly different between the two communities. The diversity in this New England city (21% both foreign-born persons; 21% population who identify as Hispanic/Latinx (Data USA, n.d) may help newcomers feel comfortable to engage with others who look or speak like them, therefore increasing opportunities to join in activities with those who have lived in

the area longer. Additionally, language barriers are mentioned less frequently in New England, which is consistent with the demographics in the local city and the possibility that more people in New England are bilingual, or speak some level of Spanish.

In the current study, we found that church was discussed less frequently among New England participants. While we do not have data to clarify why this occurred, our experience suggests that this could be related to the "norms" in the local community among US-born persons to attend church less, or perhaps is related to the preferences of the UC themselves.

Our results also showed a large difference in the training needs that were discussed among participants in the two cities. One of the foster care programs uses the Foster Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) model for training and the other uses Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP). Dorsey and colleagues (2008) explained that while both of these models are widely used and supported, there is a fundamental difference in their philosophy in that MAPP training focuses on the preparing foster parents expectations for what the role will be, and PRIDE focuses on underlying assumptions, values, and competencies that will help them once in the role of foster parent. Therefore, one explanation might be that the existing training varied. For example, perhaps parents who attended MAPP trainings found it more relevant to working with immigrant children, or that this agency offered more optional trainings that were specific to the needs of immigrants. Future research could look into both the required and optional trainings offered to foster parents before they accept UC into their homes.

### **Synthesis of Themes across the Research Questions**

In the current study we present the results of two research questions, one focusing on the positive macro level factors within a community that help unaccompanied children to adjust, and then the opposite- the negative aspects of a community that create a barrier to adjustment, often creating human rights violations for these children. It is noteworthy that there is some overlap among the themes within each research question, but also between the two research questions, and those findings will be discussed here.

There are many positive aspects of communities, and we find that they are integrated as they work together to better the adjustment of unaccompanied children. For example, community relationships, between UC and others are very similar to the idea behind inter-agency collaboration and building relationships among service providers with the goal of improving case outcomes for UC in foster care. Similarly, the community is a place where youth can practice many skills they learn, but it is also therefore by nature the place in which they access healthcare and participate in the church which were noted here as separate themes due to their salience and distinct roles.

When thinking about the reasons for which unaccompanied children struggle to adjust to their local communities, there is some notable overlap in our identified themes of barriers to community participation, language barriers, training needs, and unwelcoming communities. First, a youth who lacks language skills may be more hesitant to try and engage in the community, and the community may be more hostile towards him/her. Second, a community that lacks knowledge and empathy for these children is likely to be unwelcoming and would benefit from bystander training. Similarly, a community that lacks compassion and understanding of how to work with and welcome UC will unintentionally provide barriers to participation through daily policies and

procedures such as requiring social security numbers or other forms of legal status and identification on application materials.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the overlap between welcoming and unwelcoming communities. These are opposites, but both were salient and important themes that arose from the transcripts as the local sentiment towards immigrants at large can play a large role on the lives of these children. One caseworker explained that most communities are a blend: “there’s both sides, there’s the kind community where some are really welcoming” and a foster parent said, “there’s ugly people everywhere, but they’re outnumbered by the good people.”

### **Limitations**

While multiple different professional roles (i.e., direct care staff, case managers, supervisors, teachers, legal staff, foster parents, medical staff, therapists and senior management) were included to ensure a holistic view was obtained, the study could have been stronger if the voices of UC were more directly heard. However, given that UC are in the custody of the federal government, they were unable to participate. There are a multitude of foster care programs in the ORR network, managed by various national agencies but only two agencies/communities were included in this analysis and therefore the information gathered cannot be easily generalized to the larger population of UC in foster care.

In the comparison between communities, we notice that both community level assets and barriers were described more frequently during the Midwest focus groups. There were 13 focus groups held there, and only nine held in New England so there was more opportunity for comments to arise on each idea in the Midwest. While the results



tables show a side by side comparison for the two communities, we cannot say that there is a true comparison due to this. Additionally, the agency in the Midwest is known among providers as having a larger set of internal discretionary funds, and supplemental fundraising effort (to that of the funds provided by LIRS and ORR for program implementation), which can be spent on programming and assistance for UC.

### **Implications**

The results of this study provide a basis for further research into the role of the community and how it influences the process of adjustment that UC in foster care experience. Further research would be greatly enhanced if it were to include interviews with UC themselves, but as discussed above this is currently prohibited due to policy. Therefore, to create this opportunity, it would require significant advocacy efforts to change existing policies within the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Researchers should begin to push boundaries and start asking for access to the voice of UC themselves now as it may take time to achieve, but given the human rights violations that some UC face while in care (Gonzales, 2018; Gonzales, 2019; Hauslohner, & Sacchetti, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Krueger, Hargrove, & Jones, 2019) it is important that these children have the ability to speak up for themselves and be active participants in improving the system. Engaging in community-based participatory research and/or youth participatory research where the UC are the ones to create questions, and guide the research process would be extremely effective here. Community-engaged research is centered on reciprocal relationships between the community of interest and the researcher (Pasick, Olivia, Goldstein & Nguyen, 2010), and has been shown to strengthen both community organizations providing services to clients and the research community

(Ahmed et al., 2016). Lastly, the preliminary ideas that stem from Cultural Stress Theory and the comparison across states lead us to recommend that future research include an angle specific to the community in which data is collected, assessing the cultural and linguistic diversity in these areas, as well as policies around welcoming and sanctuary cities.

This study highlights a number of promising practices that can assist UC as they adjust to the US such as welcoming communities, community relationships, inter-agency collaboration and the church, so next steps require more targeted evaluations of these facilitators to better understand the impact they have. Partnerships with both the local and national service providers for LTFC should continue to be developed in order to create program evaluations that are agency-engaged and that will be helpful to their future work in this area. Additionally, the quality of research being conducted would be improved if it were to include a longitudinal aspect, and if standardized measures were used. For example, longitudinal research could be used to compare youth who are matched with mentors, or involved in their religious community to those who are not.

Our findings suggest that service providers who interact with UC would benefit from more training; consistent with the recommendations by Evans, Diebold, and Calvo (2018) that suggest more training for service providers who work with UC. Therefore, more research is needed to identify the types of training that are necessary to equip foster care staff and administrators, foster families, and community agencies to help UC overcome community barriers to adjustment. It is also important to ensure that the training is adaptable, and stays up to date with as the demographics of UC shift over time. These trainings should be made available in a multitude of ways (live webinars, on site

visits, and through the learning management system portal) not only to service providers but also to foster parents, professionals interacting with UC clients, and community members at-large. Additionally, Holtzman, Dukes, and Page (2012), highlight benefits of conducting trainings in interdisciplinary settings so that service providers can critically think about ways in which their work overlaps and how they can work together as a team.

The results of this study suggest that practitioners could improve and expand services that will aid UC and their adjustment to the US. For example, foster care programs could ensure all youth are matched with multiple mentors or community members; continue interagency collaboration and communication; and encourage churches and foster care agencies to work together. At the local level, service providers could ensure provision of safe and reliable transportation to make it easier for youth to engage in the community, create peer to peer learning opportunities for foster parents and the entire foster family, and increase local fundraising and grant opportunities to supplement the funding from ORR and LIRS in order to increase the number of services and opportunities available to UC in LTFC programs.

Additionally, Katiuzhinsky and Okech (2014) call for social workers to refocus on human rights rather than solely focusing on presenting client needs. There is a rhetoric in today's society around unaccompanied children and undocumented immigrants that claims these people are undeserving of a fruitful life in the US due to their lack of legal papers. Santiago and colleagues (2015) claim that the human rights framework is still developing in the social work field despite the fact that it is very consistent with our professional code of ethics. The social work profession has a duty to advocate for both

the well-being and the rights of these children in order to help them build a life and achieve well-being in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

Our research focused on the experiences of participants from communities in the Midwest and New England and found that both communities are home to many factors that may both promote and inhibit adjustment for UC. There were multiple themes identified as positive ways for UC to engage in the community, learn about American culture, and adjust to a new environment. These include: the role of community relationships, inter-agency collaborations and partnerships, welcoming communities and sanctuary cities, utilizing the community as the host locations to practice skills and engage with US-born persons, the community as a source of access to health and mental healthcare, and the role of the local church as a staple in both the child's life and a source of tangible goods and volunteers. Alternatively, participants alluded to barriers in terms of actually participating in the community, lack of language skills, a lack of training and knowledge among service providers, and sentiments of unwelcoming communities.

We can see that many of these themes build upon one another and are complementary. For example, by building partnerships between agencies and increasing knowledge of medical personnel it is possible that there will be greater access to health services for UC. Additionally, a UC who lacks confidence and language skills by nature is less likely to engage in the community and with US-born persons. However, we also see that some of these themes are contradictory to each other- specifically welcoming communities and unwelcoming communities. This shows that there are diverse experiences and resources even within a given community. Moving forward, more

research is needed to study these assets and barriers in order to create interventions and advocate for funding of social service programs.

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**CHAPTER III: SUPPORT STRATEGIES: THE PERSPECTIVE OF SERVICE  
PROVIDERS ON EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND PROMISING  
PRACTICES FOR UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT STUDENTS IN THE  
UNITED STATES**

## **Abstract**

Unaccompanied immigrant children from the Northern Triangle of Central America are living in communities and attending schools all over the United States. While there is substantial literature on the academic achievement and English language skills of immigrant students, there is less literature that focuses specifically on unaccompanied immigrant students, and even less that focuses on the social and emotional well-being of this population. This study uses qualitative data from a wide range of service providers for unaccompanied children to address the needs they face in US schools, and to highlight promising practices being implemented in two geographic locations. Our results show that challenges exist in terms of the capacity of schools and school districts; the students' language ability and preparedness for school; cultural differences; and health and mental health challenges. Our results show that supports exist in the realm of academics, language, cooperation among service providers, emotional, and behavioral strategies. Implications for school staff include the need to build partnerships with bilingual mental health supports, and conduct self-assessments to evaluate whether the school is meeting the needs of unaccompanied immigrant students. We recommend that future research focus on the long term social and emotional well-being of unaccompanied immigrant students in schools, using standardized measures. Implications for school administrators and policy makers include the use of more welcoming policies at the school, and school district level.

**Keywords:** unaccompanied child; school; education; promising practices; challenges

## **Introduction**

The population of unaccompanied children in the United States (US) has grown significantly in the past two decades, and while these children are attending schools all across the country, many are struggling (Booi et al., 2016; Diebold, Evans, & Hornung, 2019; Szlyk, Berger Cardoso, Lane, & Evans, 2019; Vidal de Haymes, Avrushin, & Coleman, 2018). In this paper, we will discuss the findings of a qualitative study of focus groups and interviews with a wide variety of service providers to highlights both the needs and support strategies in place to help UC succeed in the US school system.

### **Unaccompanied Children from the Northern Triangle**

In Federal Fiscal Year 2019, 76,020 unaccompanied children were apprehended in United States (US) because they lacked legal status. These were placed in the care and custody of the Department of Health and Human Services through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (DHS/ORR) because they were not accompanied by their parents or legal guardians, and were under the age of 18 (Homeland Security Act of 2002 Public Law 107–296, 6 U.S.C. § 279; U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP], 2019). The majority of these UC were from the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala (54%), Honduras (26%), and El Salvador (12%) (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], (2019). Most UC come to the US in search of safety from interpersonal or community violence, to reunite with family, or for greater economic and educational opportunities (Szlyk et al., 2019; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014).

After fleeing their homes, enduring potentially treacherous journeys to the US (Schmidt, 2017), surviving the shelter care system (Gonzales, 2019; Krueger, Hargrove, & Jones, 2019), and finally feeling a sense of safety (Roth et al., 2019), UC still have

needs that should be addressed. These needs include stable housing, meaningful connections in the community, cultural support and acculturation assistance, independent living skills training, educational supports, assistance with obtaining legal status, healthcare, English language training, and safety from gangs and human traffickers (Crea, Lopez, Hasson, Evans, Palleschi, & Underwood, 2018). Many UC who are living with family members in the community struggle to enroll in local schools, which can provide an opportunity for education, social skill development, and peer support (Evans, Perez-Aponte, McRoy, in press). UC encounter an abundance of challenges resulting from their legal status and mental health needs and only 5-10% of UC are provided comprehensive follow-up services in the community after they are released or reunified (Jani, Underwood, & Ranweiler, 2016).

### **The Current Study**

Disparities and inequalities among people of different races and socioeconomic statuses are prevalent in the United States' educational system as well as the child welfare system (McRoy, 2011). While there is research on the benefits and barriers to education for immigrants (Hao & Pong, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017), and for youth in foster care (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006; Zorc, O'Reilly, Matone, Long, Watts, & Rubin, 2013), this study will add to the knowledge base by looking specifically at unaccompanied immigrant children who are being served through the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Long Term Foster Care program. Our research questions are as follows: (1) What challenges do unaccompanied children in foster care face as they navigate the educational system in the US?, and (2)



What are current strategies being implemented in schools to assist unaccompanied immigrant students?

## **Immigrant Students in US Schools**

### **Benefits and Rights to Education**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) outlines education as a basic human right, and in the United States all students have access and are entitled to free public education (Civil Rights Act of 1964; Plyer V. Doe, 1982). Education and the opportunity to gain important knowledge and skills are seen as one aspect of human capital that is important for future economic success (better paying and meaningful employment) and social well-being (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016; Hao & Pong, 2008; Stone, 2009). Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states the importance of free education for all children, regardless of national origin.

“(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.  
(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.” (United Nations, 1948, p. 7)

School is one of the primary ways in which immigrant students integrate into the community as it is one of the places where they most frequently interact with US-born children and adults (Birman, Weinstein, Chan & Beehler, 2007; Crea et al., 2018; Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). Schools also provide the opportunity for parents to socialize and learn about the community and its culture (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014). Oftentimes unaccompanied children are eager to adapt

to their country of destination because they realize it is key to moving forward with their education (Thommessen et al., 2015).

### **Challenges Immigrant Students Face in School**

The challenges immigrant students encounter in school vary widely in their nature and significance. Some of the most common challenges include the enrollment processes, entry and standardized testing, language needs, social and emotional well-being, lack of education in their home countries, and the challenges of immigrants with special needs (Booi et al., 2016; Kaplan, 2009; Maynard, Vaughn, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2016; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018; Reynolds & Crea, 2017; Szlyk et al., 2019; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Standardized tests and assessments of special needs do not always accurately assess a student's knowledge of concepts taught in the classroom as they lack of culturally relevant material and require that students have a certain level of English skills, and therefore should be used cautiously (Kaplan, 2009; Roy-Campbell, 2012). When schools mandate that these assessments be used, teachers may be pressured to over utilize memorization instead of spending time to help students fully develop both language and content knowledge (Tamer, 2014). Students feel inadequate when they have difficulty learning English and understanding what is being communicated in class (Szlyk et al., 2019). Educational challenges related to language are especially salient for indigenous students from Guatemala (Crea et al., 2018).

**Preparedness for school.** Unaccompanied children arrive to the US for different reasons, and bring with them a wide variety of backgrounds and challenges. First, many UC students arrive to the US with limited schooling in their home countries or having significant time out of formal school settings due to the journey to the US (Chishti &

Hipsman, 2014; Szlyk et al., 2019). Second, they may also arrive to US schools with trauma histories, or third with limited literacy skills (Chishti & Hipsman, 2014; Szlyk et al., 2019). Fourth, the educational environment in shelter facilities where US are held here in the US vary drastically in their programming but may include overcrowded classrooms, a curriculum largely focused on English skills and not content, and classrooms with mixed ages and skill levels which can lead to behavioral issues (Diebold, Evans, & Hornung, 2019). All of these together may make unaccompanied children less prepared for the curriculum in US public schools in formal education.

Access to schooling in home country also varies widely. In some low- and middle-income countries, some note that teachers are often late, absent, or unmotivated to provide quality education to their students (Bellino & Dryden-Peterson, 2018). Some families struggle to pay the costs associated with attending school, such as the cost of uniforms, transportation, and basic classroom supplies, which may cause students to drop out of school (Colom, Ruiz, Catino, Hallman, Peracca, & Shellenberg, 2004; U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Additionally, students and their families may choose not to attend school because they live far from school, and the commute to school can be dangerous, especially for females traveling alone (Amin, 2011; Colom et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).

**Social and emotional well-being in schools.** School environments pose a challenge for students, especially for those in their adolescence when peer influences have an inordinate influence on their adjustment. Most unaccompanied immigrant children arrive in the US as adolescents (ORR, 2019) and are similarly subjected to peer influences and their subsequent effects on their adjustment both to school and the larger

society. First generation immigrant students face social marginalization within US schools and struggle to make friends due to differences in communication style, behaviors within the classroom, and lack of understanding of school norms (Reynolds & Crea, 2017; Szlyk et al., 2019). Immigrant and refugee students often feel that they do not have social support in schools and this isolation makes them less likely to be successful than their native-born peers (Barrett, Kuperminc, & Lewis, 2013; Bates et al., 2009). However, Szlyk et al. (2019) note that unaccompanied immigrant students often find strong social relationships and comradery among other immigrants that speak Spanish.

**Capacity of the school to adequately serve UC.** Teachers, administrators, and school staff play a critical role in how students are welcomed into a new school. Kurbegovic (2016) found that while teachers felt prepared to teach refugee students, they did not see the unique needs and circumstances faced by these students which could mean that they are not actually as well equipped to work with these students as they thought (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). Similarly, with pressure for all teachers to be able to adequately teach English Language Learners (ELLs) in the mainstream classroom, there is a need for additional instructional education on working with immigrants so that ELL teachers are not bearing the load for the school (Russell, 2015). Similarly, Szente, Hoot, and Taylor (2006) recommend that teachers include nonverbal social-emotional interventions, such as the use of peer learning strategies, teaching native-born students about refugee experiences to build empathy and understanding, and connecting refugee students to resources outside the school.

With the significant rise in numbers of unaccompanied immigrant children in the past decade, some schools have noticed differences in student dynamics, or pressure in

how they welcome and prepare these students for excellence in the school setting. The struggle to find qualified and dedicated staff to work with UC begins at the schools in youth shelters, and continues to community-based schools (Diebold, Evans, & Hornung, 2019). Crea et al. (2018) found that some schools did not have teachers and staff who were dedicated and creative. Lastly, schools often face financial struggles which can make it hard for the district or individual schools to implement practices to welcome newcomers (Berger Cardoso, 2019).

### **Academic, Emotional, and Behavioral Support Strategies**

School systems have varying levels of support for students who are struggling academically, emotionally, and behaviorally (Vidal de Haymes, Avrushin, & Coleman, 2018). More research exists on the effectiveness of these programs for US-born students than for immigrant students. For example, research indicates that educational liaisons help families to navigate the special needs system for native born students (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). For foster youth, services such as counseling, spiritual services, fine arts, peer to peer tutoring, and access to computers, sports and leadership opportunities were found to improve educational outcomes for foster youth living in residential education programs (Lee & Barth, 2009).

**Academic and language support strategies for immigrant students.** English as a Second Language classes and tutoring are the main academic support strategies for immigrant students in US schools. While these are both effective and critical services for immigrant students, these services may look different for students who are illiterate in all languages, have special needs, or those with large gaps in their educational backgrounds. The US Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA)

supports the idea of students becoming bilingual and works with school districts to ensure policies and practices are not discriminatory against ELL students (Office of English Language Acquisition [OELA], 2019). Some schools offer credit recovery programs (for immigrant and non-immigrant students) that allow students to retake tests or complete additional assignments as a way to pass courses rather than re-enrolling for another semester which can lead to delayed graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

**Emotional and behavioral support strategies for immigrant students.** In recent years, social and emotional learning have become recognized as a major goal of public schools around the US. Mentors and advocates such as coaches, teachers, and church members helped immigrant students to be both more engaged in the school environment and led to better academic outcomes (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Szente, Hoot and Taylor (2006) found that teachers who incorporated peer to peer activities and group work in their classes where immigrants and native born students could work collaboratively together helped the students both socially and academically. Schapiro, Gutierrez, Blackshaw, and Chen (2018) found that UC had difficulty finding the resources they needed for behavioral health, and used a school based mental health partnership to refer appropriate (44% of UC) students to therapy (Schapiro, Gutierrez, Blackshaw & Chen, 2018).

While the literature related to unaccompanied immigrant youth in schools is growing, there is still much research needed to ensure that these students are having their needs met in US public schools. UC who graduate from high school will have better opportunities in the future.

The existing literature emphasizes that many UC students arrive with a lack of formal schooling and mental health needs that need to be addressed in the school. Additionally, we know that UC students face discrimination and social struggles as they adjust to school, and that many schools feel they do not have the resources and skills needed to meet the needs of UC. At the same time the literature points to promising practices including educational liaisons, mentors, and school-based mental health programs. The current study will take a deeper dive into understanding the support strategies that are currently operating for UC in two midsize cities.

### **Methodology**

A variety of service providers participated in interviews and focus groups (separated according to their job function) including teachers and school personnel, medical staff, attorneys, foster care workers, foster care supervisors, foster care program directors, and foster parents. There were a total of 22 focus groups ( $n=79$  service providers) conducted in spring 2016 by a scholar with extensive experience in global child welfare, in collaboration with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and their foster care agencies serving unaccompanied children in two midsize cities, one in the northeast, and one in the Midwest. The focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol where the researcher was able to ask follow-up and impromptu questions as relevant to the discussion (Rubin & Babbie, 2017) and lasted 60-90 minutes each. The protocol was approved by the University's IRB office.

### **Positionality**

The first author of this paper has extensive work experience with unaccompanied immigrant children, both as an in-home bilingual caseworker providing family

preservation services to families of children recently released from immigration detention, and as a program manager administering foster care services. For the latter, she worked for LIRS, the community agency partner for this research project. This is important to note in considering data analysis because her work experience with UC provides a specific lens from which she viewed the data in this study, as well as the policy and practice recommendations being made in this manuscript. As a US born white researcher, the first author has not personally lived the same experiences as unaccompanied children in US schools, but her work on behalf of and with UC helps to inform the conclusions being drawn here.

### **Analytic Strategy**

A phenomenological orientation to qualitative inquiry is useful in understanding the common practices and behaviors among a group of people (Creswell, 2013). It is thus an appropriate orientation for this work which seeks to better understand how service providers describe the educational experiences UC face in schools, and how the educational system is supporting newcomers to the US. It is important to understand the commonalities as a way to develop best practices and potentially create policies of inclusion for UC in school settings in the US (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher who conducted the interviews and focus groups took extensive notes which were compared to the audio files by a graduate research assistant. These notes were then used for qualitative analysis in this study, and will hereafter be referred to as transcripts. The data analysis strategy entailed many steps, first of which was for the first author of this paper to immerse herself in the data by listening to the available audio files and reading the transcripts of all 22 interviews. Six transcripts were then open coded



(Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rubin & Babbie, 2017), and a preliminary list of codes was developed in alignment with the research questions of interest (Miles & Huberman, 2004). The research team gathered together for a second cycle coding and consensus-building activity in order to identify the key codes and condense the list into a codebook organized by research question (Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Saldaña, 2015). This codebook was then used by the five coders so that two persons deductively coded a portion of all 22 transcripts (Creswell, 2013). Preliminary inter-rater reliability was assessed by the first author after the first three transcripts in order to improve the descriptions available in the codebook, and to condense codes that were underutilized or confusing to distinguish between.

Agreement among coders is important in qualitative work in order to establish credibility among the meaning behind data. Therefore, the inter-rater reliability was calculated by assessing the number of times that both coders of a given transcript, identified the same theme for each quotation, was divided by the total number of items coded in order to reach the agreement percentage. If the inter-rater reliability was below 80% match, which is the established level of acceptable similarity (Creswell, 2013) for any given transcript, the two coders met together to discuss discrepancies and reach consensus.

After the data analysis process was completed, the first author held an external audit meeting with five staff members from LIRS (Morse, 2015). This process enabled staff members to see the preliminary results and discuss how they relate to what is seen in practice on a regular basis. Staff agreed that the results were representative of what they would expect as responses to the given research questions, and offered insights and

explanations into some of the findings, which are represented in the discussion section of this paper. Lastly, the comments given by participants are quantified and displayed in tables as a means to visually depict the data in a way that can help social workers and agency administrators to inform decisions.

## Results

### **Research Question 1: What challenges are specific to unaccompanied children in foster care as they navigate the educational system in the US?**

Our first research question was designed to address the specific challenges that unaccompanied immigrant students face in the US school system. We recognize that some of these are similar to other immigrant groups, and that some are unique, or perhaps have added complexities. The main findings include struggles with language abilities, the school system having a low capacity to serve UC, the students' lack of preparedness for US schools, a cultural clash, as well as mental and physical health challenges, as described below.

Table 3.1. Challenges Faced by Unaccompanied Children in the School System

Challenge	# Comments
Language challenges in school	38
Low capacity of US system	38
Lack of school preparedness	28
Cultural clash	19
Health and Mental Health challenges	14

### **Language Challenges**

Challenges learning the English language were the most common barrier mentioned by participants. Language skills are a foundation, and one of the first things

needed to be able to socially and educationally interact and succeed in US schools.

Challenges mentioned by participants include students' lack of English skills, the challenges that come with learning English and Spanish at the same time (i.e., illiterate students and students who speak indigenous languages upon arrival to the US), and a lack of translation and interpretation services within the school system.

One teacher noted that both the quantity of available personnel, and the policy on interpretation, can hold them back from serving students effectively: "Having sufficient amount of translation services for families and students without a long wait time, that's a huge challenge for us as a whole" and then went on to say, "through the school system we need to submit a request two weeks prior [for an in person interpreter and this], makes it difficult when something comes up and we need translation on emergency basis." One teacher expressed that:

"Beyond stigma, the biggest need is language barriers in classroom. If you can't learn you can't do a whole lot of other things. [You have to] learn English so you can have a mastery of the material. And if you feel confident in classroom you feel confident in other things. Otherwise, students feel overwhelmed in classroom because the teacher talks too fast and they don't understand."

Not all US public schools have the same resources available to UC students. One caseworker said, "[There is] not a lot of Spanish support, and classes are so far above them [so] they don't understand. The message they get at school is that "they're stupid". However, from the foster care agency they hear the other side as "there's encouragement to continue education ... they're bright and resilient" and one foster parent pointed out:

"We didn't have an ESL program, she's the only student they're working with. The district is rising to the challenge to meet what she needs, but they have done a lot of research...she's learned English fairly well and quickly and that's because that's all she does and all she hears. It's hard to type an English paper when you're just getting the speaking part down and you're still learning English."

For UC “coming from Guatemala and El Salvador, a lot speak dialects” and begin to learn Spanish while in detention, then begin to learn English, often their third language shortly after they enter mainstream schools. A caseworker noted that “[we need to] work more on providing more and better ESL services, especially to kids from Guatemala who don’t even know Spanish.”

Some communities have charter or magnet schools that are designed to meet the needs of immigrant students in a separate building where the purpose is to help students learn English and to gain the skills they need to enter mainstream schools at grade level which is done through experiential learning, increasing autonomy and responsibility of students, and providing mutual academic support (Internationals Network, 2018). A teacher explained, “a lot go to [the newcomer school] first to learn English, and then go to public high school... kids are in a rush to get [to] high school.” While these newcomer schools are perceived to be advantageous by many participants, an attorney also described these schools to say, “kids are sitting with other kids of their nationality speaking their native language. I don’t know if concentrating them in the school is the best approach.” One teacher mentioned, “It would be great to have [newcomer programs] in each school rather than separated.”

### **Low Capacity of US Educational System to Serve Unaccompanied Children**

The systems-level challenge that was most frequently discussed by participants is the fact that mainstream US schools are not prepared to meet the needs of the UC entering their districts. A foster parent expressed that “schools are hindered with how much they can do” given limited resources, and a supervisor elaborated to say “we’re seeing our graduation rates increase, but we’re questioning whether they’re getting the

education they deserve” explaining that some of the struggle is in having enough information up front to really understand the student upon their arrival to school. Similarly, the lack of information coupled with the cultural adjustment that UC are experiencing makes it hard for schools to adequately assess these students. A manager explained this phenomena: “If a child has not learned the alphabet in their own language, that’s another compounding factor in terms of schooling. Doing really good assessment in terms of background is pretty critical.”

Another challenge identified includes existing policies and procedures which do not adequately meet the needs of UC. Participants mentioned the debate that schools go through when thinking about grade placement. Is it based on age, academic level, or something else? One person said, “the school system is putting a child in ninth grade who never set foot in school [before].” A foster parent said “we need to stop experimenting and come up with a plan.”

Schools face difficulty in working with unaccompanied immigrant students and trying to meet the unique needs of each. A caseworker expressed that “for one kid, the school has yet to provide any in-school support, [therefore the foster care] agency has to make sure supports are in place.” A foster parent mentioned the “school system [is] not serving them well. [The] only remedy would be a special education advocate.” Others talked about ways in which the schools were lacking, such as “[there is] no sports program here;” “salaries for ESL teachers are very low;” and “[we are] missing a partnership with a trade school” which is holding students back because “if kids were able to go to vocational school and be able to make money sooner... so many of them just want to work, they have a lot of debt from coming here.” An attorney described how

unaccompanied immigrant students are often “enrolled in the worst schools in the district where they’re not going to be learning much” and that kids face “the pressure of standardized tests, and pull down scores of these schools.” They also discussed overcrowded classrooms as a challenge “average classroom is 34 kids, [but] ESL ideal is 12-15 kids” and another school said, “we have classrooms of 25 [students] of all different levels and languages.”

Participants also acknowledged that there is an innate stigma and the idea that the student needs to change rather than putting supports in to help the UC succeed, especially as schools get overwhelmed with the numbers of UC they serve. One therapist described this nuance when she described a client and said that we should not be blaming the teachers as they face a difficult situation:

“A kid is mislabeled with ADHD – in reality he’s been working on a farm since he was six. They try to teach him at age level, but they need to teach him at a 5-year-old level. Kids like him end up with an outstanding number of suspensions, it’s hard for schools, they’re just tired of him.”

### **Unaccompanied Children’s Lack of Preparedness for School**

Coupled with the systems level issue of the school’s ability to meet the needs of UC, is the issue of the student’s individual preparedness for school. Participants expressed the ways in which UC themselves were not the typical students and how their backgrounds, especially a lack of preparedness for US schools posed a challenge to their individual adjustment and academic success. The gaps in education that UC experience due to dropping out in home country, or due to their time making the journey to the US was mentioned many times. A foster parent said “some of them come with little to no background in education and they’re expected to catch up and pass [state standardized

testing]” and another said “educational gaps often exist. The journey is so long [they may be] out of school for a few years.”

Beyond the fact that these gaps exist, participants mentioned how it creates complications in terms of grade placement, emotional stability, and can hinder a healthy adjustment, socially and academically, into the school environment. For example, a teacher explained that because the majority of UC are entering US schools in the high school years, the school district would need to adapt curriculum to really meet the needs of UC adequately. This is evidenced by a direct care worker who expressed challenges with “basic things that kids learn in elementary school. [For example, I] asked a child to write five paragraphs, and what I got was just a bunch of sentences. I wish they were learning basic things from school.” A supervisor suggested that “it takes a lot of creativity and work and committed teachers and school and committed foster family to advocate” for a student to succeed. Because of these gaps and the potential lack of resources, other participants expressed their opinion that the classroom content is too advanced. There was also discussion about the implications of this lack of formal education in terms of social and emotional needs. For example, a caseworker noted that “the gap in education plays a big role in mental health and adjustment,” and a therapist explained that the “lack of education in home country is systematically an issue.”

Participants also described struggles with transition, both the transition from newcomer schools to local district schools, and the transition from high school to college. A teacher explained that “once they develop language skills they transition to [local district] schools for required courses.” Another teacher expressed that the curriculums and goals are different between the two types of schools:

“The difficulty for us is that we’re teaching on standard-based competencies, but in home [local district] schools it’s credit based, so [there is a] need to turn into numerical grade. Here we are trying to build the positives, and then end up giving them a D, or F or C when in the spectrum of what they’re learning they’re doing better work.”

This teacher expressed that it is also hard “translating curriculum here to [state] common core curriculum.” When discussing college, one participant mentioned that “Access to higher education [is limited because they] can’t fill out FAFSA because they have no social security number.” A teacher added that the lack of available funding for college forced some students to choose alternative paths “the valedictorian went to community college. It’s so important that they get legal status” in order to have all doors open for the student.

### **Cultural Clash**

Services providers who participated in the focus groups and interviews discussed the many ways in which unaccompanied immigrant students face cultural clashes and struggle to meet the cultural norms of US school systems. For example, the expectations both for the students and parent engagement are different, and there seems to be a cultural acceptance around missing school or dropping out in order to work and send money home to family as noted by an attorney who nonchalantly said, “A lot of kids drop out and get their GED.” A teacher explained that “kids don’t know what it means to be in school. The expectations in different countries are not the same, [and this] affects behavior and study skills” and another agreed that they cannot “assume that kids know what the rules are” and therefore they

“try to address it, and teach them the rule. The second time we contact the family or caseworker, and the third time there is consequence. It’s not like mainstream school, but something suitable– [we do] a lot of mediation and conflict resolution.”



A foster parent discussed that the cultural norms in school extend to social relationships by saying “another challenge is getting accustomed to the norms here” and went on to explain a situation at school where “one of my kids had difficulty with the girlfriend/boyfriend relationship and [using] acceptable communication compared to back home.” A caseworker elaborated on the systemic issues of cultural clash by saying

“[There is] a lot of hostility in the community with [kids who speak] different languages. That’s been a real challenge to get people to open their minds to other cultures. [For example, the] school board is resistant to having kids in classes. How are we supposed to help them? They are really resistant to putting services in place and want the kid to change for them instead of making a plan for the kid. That kind of determines the kid’s [level of] success.”

Parent engagement is a concept that is unique and yet extremely important in the context of US based education. In some countries parents are pleased with the fact that their children are attending school and therefore do not engage much, or push to change and advance practices as it is already beyond what they had as a child (Ishihara-Brito, 2013). A teacher noted that “parents often hesitate coming to the school in general because of lack of language, they think it’s a negative connotation to walk into the building because something must be wrong.” Regardless, the school staff explained that they are trying to increase participation and change perceptions “we keep trying to develop new things. We tried contacting parents in general, having agencies contact the parents, ... and sending postcards to parents, we’re continuously trying to develop new things” but also noted the limitations to doing this in that “the district has seven languages translated, but we have 19 different languages, meaning there’s 12 we don’t have. We keep trying new initiatives to see what would work the best.”

### **Health and Mental Health Challenges**

Prior research has established that many UC arrive with significant trauma backgrounds. The focus groups in this study highlighted the desire for teachers and school personnel to meet the trauma needs of students, but that it can be difficult when there are many things going on at once. A teacher at a newcomer school said “trauma is a huge part – it’s a new way of teaching, a whole trauma understanding” and went on to explain that “it’s not a regular public school where a couple kids have things going on. Everyone has [trauma], there are triggers that you’re not aware of, and ... that are important to know to understand the child.” A program director echoed this by saying there are “huge huge mental health needs” and another manager expressed the variety in trauma backgrounds:

“They come from places that are post-conflict, trauma they have witnessed includes witnessing someone being murdered, forced out of country, being threatened, discriminated against because of gender identity, being displaced from their homes, the journey here and what they witnessed along the way. A lot of girls have been assaulted or molested in different ways. The journeys are brutal, they suffer from hunger, robbery, assault. Some kids have never had primary care doctors or dentists. There is separation from family, generational trauma, and some kids come with learning disabilities, it takes a while for the system to pinpoint it, once they start school the [Individualized Educational Plans] IEPs don’t come into place because no language skills, [and there is a preference to] learn language before testing.”

Many participants described how the health and mental health challenges of UC influence their well-being and success within the school, or how the school can act to help reduce these challenges. A teacher explained that “each child presents with different needs, and meeting all those needs is difficult” and another said that “100% of the kids are coming in with trauma backgrounds, such large numbers makes it difficult to maintain [mental and emotional well-being for all students].” A caseworker agreed that meeting the demand was a struggle by saying that “when someone needs extra mental

health services, [there is] only so much we can do because there is not enough funding.”

A participant went on to explain that “sometimes in the school system, some kids struggle safety-wise because other kids have found out about their situation and they’ve been targeted, getting picked on, bullying them” and it was noted that “we do have our fair share” of physical altercations. It was also acknowledged that “counseling services are needed in various languages” within the school setting.

Participants expressed ways in which the system could be improved. First, some feel that UC could benefit from mentors or life coaches in the school environment as explained by a teacher who said “The support system – there isn’t enough people to help them the way they need to be helped.” Secondly, when it comes to physical health, another teacher said “we refer them... but it would be helpful to have an in-house health center ... for immunizations, and health appointments. UC are missing school if they go to appointments, [it would be] more helpful if on site.” Thirdly, some felt that more trauma training could be provided to school staff, as demonstrated by a medical provider who said “[there is] not enough training in therapeutic processes for staff, so they can be traumatized.”

**Research Question 2: What are current strategies being implemented in schools to assist unaccompanied immigrant students?**

The second research question addressed in this study was designed to examine the existing strategies and promising practices being implemented by schools, foster care agencies, and through partnerships among service providers in order to aid unaccompanied children in US school systems. Our findings include the importance of academic and language support strategies, having an interdisciplinary team of support

persons, as well as emotional and behavioral support strategies. Table 2 shows the frequency of comments for each of the themes. One foster parent noted that regardless of which supports a student needs, it is important to “get all supports in place as soon as possible.”

Table 3.2. Support Strategies in Place for Unaccompanied Immigrant Students

Strategy	# Comments
Academic support strategies	44
Interdisciplinary team of supports in the educational system	28
Emotional & behavioral support strategies	22

### **Academic and Language Support Strategies**

Academics are the cornerstone of the educational experience and therefore were discussed quite frequently by study participants as an area where the needs of unaccompanied immigrant students are being adequately met. Basic services mentioned included tutoring, after school help, and small class sizes. A foster care staff member explained they “have a group tutoring session where volunteers spend 1.5 hours tutoring and come back every week to work with the same kids.” Another foster parent noted that “we do tutoring four nights a week, they want to learn, [but the] schools are hindered with how much they can do.” However, because the emphasis for help is often on English language learning for these students, one direct care worker explained that “[sometimes] there’s no one who can help them with their math homework” even though “we’ve been matching tutors one on one.”

Other supports acknowledged by participants included identifying student learning needs to create individual learning plans, and special education services. A

teacher explained that “making education individual to their need [taking into account] baggage and gap” in educational history is really important and should be used “to determine the need,” and a school staff member elaborated to say “individualizing as much as you can, and assessing the student ahead of time [are key] but it’s not always workable.” A teacher expressed that “[in] trying to determine whether a child would be referred for special education, the teachers can try different strategies. And if a student is not making adequate process, they then begin the team process to transition to special education.” However, a foster care program manager explained the difficulties with the system in that “some kids come with learning disabilities, and it takes a while for the system to pinpoint it.” She explained that “Once they start school the IEPs don’t come into place because there are no language skills, [many districts require the child to] learn the language before testing.” Research is needed into the special education process for UC newly transitioning into high school settings, before better policies can be created and alleviate these struggles.

Other academic supports indicated include the caseworker as educational advocate, credit recovery programs, having a strong transition from the newcomer school to the local school, and multilevel classrooms. A direct care worker explained that the “majority start at one school, [and then] some transition to regular high school.” A teacher who participated in the focus group explained that “we’re a credit recovery school, you get credits in English, Math, and Science... By the time we get them they’re 16 or 17 years old, so we try to make it more possible for them.” Another teacher expressed that “as an ESL teacher, it would be great to have a basic newcomers class, where we offer support while teaching the standards.” While programs and supports that

aid the academic achievement of UC vary from one school to the next, participants expressed their appreciation for newcomer and credit recovery programs.

When it comes to thinking about life after high school it is “really important to find what kids are interested in- whether college, or skill/trade” so that service providers can assist with the appropriate resources in order to support these goals and because “most of us grow up thinking about college and profession, but these kids don’t have the same [expectations].” A foster care staff member explained that they offer “15-week life skills classes [which includes] information about college education: how to look for housing, [going on] college visits, FAFSA, college application, and employment.” And a caseworker described that “taking them to the college campuses” exposes them to higher education and a wider range of options for their future. Another staff member expressed that “colleges always welcome our youth for college visits to understand college life. [It helps them to] see a broader sense of community.” Partnerships with local colleges provide college tours and information sessions that can benefit the student, as well as the college if the student chooses to apply there.

Academic support specifically related to language skills were also brought up nine times. One teacher noted that “All teachers are ESL certified or dual certified” yet a foster care supervisor felt that “[we need to] supplement what they receive” when it comes to ESL services in the schools. When a supervisor was asked how they determine success of UC, the response was “ESL always a big one, especially in urban areas” and therefore this agency provides “ESL classes” under the purview of the foster care program in addition to what UC get at school.

### **Interdisciplinary Team of Supports within the Educational System**

Participants frequently explained the benefits of service coordination among different people, both within the school and between the school and other service providers, to “build an external collaborative team.” Some personnel that were discussed as beneficial collaborators included advocates, mental health providers, nurses, local colleges, mentors, and nonprofits specifically serving immigrants and refugees.

When it comes to staff within the school, showing support and understanding of the experiences of unaccompanied immigrant students can be a benefit. One foster parent expressed that the “Principal has been great” and a teacher explained “interventionists have been a great plus, they come in and assist. [It] helps in manpower, and additional help is so important, there’s never enough with multilevel classrooms.” A staff member in the school noted that “the student-teacher connection [is critical]. When the student feels that, when the student knows the ... teacher is there.” One school discussed that they have a great team consisting of interdisciplinary personnel such as a “bilingual school adjustment counselor, bilingual behavioral specialist, and a school psychologist one day per week. [But also mentioned that they] should have a full time nurse for students’ needs.” Another school said that they have “education advocates, and there’s a clinician in-house” to help students.

Other service providers were also discussed as key players and partnerships in the success of unaccompanied immigrant students and there was a desire for them all to “come to Know Your School night.” It was said that “education is one of the hardest things and caseworkers are biggest advocates at school, because kids are left in the shadows.” A teacher described that it would be beneficial to “utilize the agencies and get more translators available and build a team, a base of stakeholders” which supports the

comments above about lack of interpretation and wait times causing a barrier to student success. A community partner commented that “All higher education [institutions] do service learning in the area” and that many volunteer their time with immigrant students within the schools. Another teacher explained how:

“It’s important for students to see there’s collaboration among all of us. One thing that would make it better would be to have agencies come in and do their groups within the [school] building... it would be great to have agencies come for after school – it makes it a more cohesive learning experience if it’s on site.”

This teacher went on to explain types of groups that had been or would be helpful such as “boys group and girls group discussing self-image, or overall well-being, [and these could] morph into what girls or boys needed. Or with therapeutic groups, we could see some of the changes with students bonding with each other” but explained that “staffing became an issue” and expressed that partnerships with community agencies could assist with this. A medical staff explained that collaboration among immigrant and refugee serving agencies benefited the school and teachers’ level of knowledge:

“The organizations that are directly involved in serving refugees get together quarterly and discuss resources for the population, what they’re doing. The Office of Refugee Resettlement also comes to tell people what to expect for the next quarter. [This is] representative of how collaborative [the city] is as a whole.”

### **Emotional and Behavioral Support Strategies**

Focus group and interview participants reviewed a variety of emotional and behavioral supports available to unaccompanied immigrant students through the school system. A supervisor also described that these students also bring positive qualities to the table that help them succeed:

“[There is] tremendous resilience among kids, [especially] given everything they’ve gone through. They do achieve a lot, not always a diploma, but the power of the human spirit is really powerful in our kiddos. That’s what I get out of



coming to work every day. A lot of their path is dictated by who they are. Overall, the outcomes [for UC] are good and positive, and overall they do very well.”

In building a school that is emotionally responsive to the mental health needs of unaccompanied immigrant students, a teacher explained that it starts with the basics by saying “I think they need a good program to support educationally. [But] they certainly need a secure and safe spot to be. We become counselors, and we need more of that in place because they need so much.” Another staff person in the school expressed that “I’d love to create a school for [UC] kids to help them catch up and deal with emotional impairments in classroom” and a teacher explained that “[there is] initial testing to place [UC] in certain groups based on needs, [but they] can move to different groups throughout year. It’s very flexible.” A teacher expressed their opinion that being a “positive behavioral intervention supports (PBIS) school” was beneficial to UC students.

Other supports that may be less formal in nature to help unaccompanied immigrant students address social and emotional needs in school include extracurricular activities, “mediation and conflict resolution” programs, and the ability to refer UC to alternative schools as needed. A foster parent noted, “she’s actually expressed a lot of gratitude for the boundaries we’ve put in place... A kid said something inappropriate to her, but she went right to the principal, and after she expressed that it was nice to have a voice and that somebody would care.” A direct care worker noted that the “alternative school is a last ditch effort after kids have been expelled from every other school” and sometimes provide the structure needed to help them push through to graduation.

Participants agreed that “extracurricular activities are important” as a way to help UC develop healthy emotions and relationships. For example, a foster parent said her foster daughter is, “real athletic and wants to be in every sport; she’s made so many

friends and that's helped her fit in" and a teacher recognized that UC enjoyed the benefits of the "traveling library bus." Another teacher discussed how students also benefit from doing community service projects "we have to put in service hours at school... in the middle of the day we go to the senior citizen's center and do mailings."

### **Discussion**

The results of this study inform us about the barriers to education for unaccompanied immigrant students, as well as promising practices being implemented to assist them with their academic outcomes. Our results highlight key themes of challenges that UC face in the school including: the capacity of the school and school district to serve UC students, language abilities of students, the student's preparedness for school, cultural differences and expectations, and health or mental health challenges. Some of the challenges are intertwined, for example, the school's inability to serve UC is a systems-level issue that matches up with the students' individual lack of preparedness for school. Our results indicate that positive supports for UC exist within the themes of academics, language, emotional, and behavioral strategies, and that these strategies are most effective when they are in cooperation among service providers.

Our results show that the capacity of the school and school district (e.g. lack of resources such as staff, money, and training, policies and procedures) sometimes stifle the potential of unaccompanied immigrant students. Participants noted that many schools are unsure how to assist UC, and therefore may inadvertently create a greater divide between mainstream students and UC in the margins. Policies and procedures may prohibit teachers and school administrators from acting in the best interest of immigrant children (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). A number of studies have examined teachers'

attitudes towards inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Ross-Hill, 2009) and note that policies of inclusive education are influenced by the beliefs and practices of the teachers implementing them. The basic act of having access to school, and an appropriate education is a human right to which all UC are entitled.

Results from this qualitative study support the common notion that unaccompanied immigrant students face language barriers in school. Our results are consistent with the literature about immigrant students in the US school system that has largely focused on the study of language acquisition (Bauer & Arazi, 2011; Rance – Roney, 2010; Pacheco, 2010). While we found that the language struggles among unaccompanied immigrant students have much in common with prior research on other immigrant groups, the participants in our study also pointed out that the struggles are sometimes greater for students who speak indigenous languages (Crea et al., 2018). While some school personnel that participated in this study indicated that all teachers are ESL certified, Russell (2015) notes that more training is needed for all school staff and teachers to ensure that ESL teachers are not overburdened because they are the only staff equipped to respond to the struggles of unaccompanied immigrant students.

Academically, children raised in immigrant families are often far behind their native born peers. For example, in 2015, 38% of fourth graders in US-born families were proficient in reading as compared with only eight percent of students in immigrant families and 24% of eighth graders living in US-born families were proficient in math as compared with only 5% of students living in immigrant families (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Therefore, specialized services and supports around academics can be crucial in order to help immigrant students be more successful. Despite the challenges,

our study found that service providers and foster parents report that UC are eager to learn and participate in the classroom, a finding consistent with research by Rana and colleagues (2011). Academic success can lead to success later in life (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016; Hao & Pong, 2008; Stone, 2009) and a study by Schapiro, Gutierrez, Blackshaw and Chen (2018) asked UC to self-identify the protective factors that helped their adaptation to the US, where 50% mentioned something related to academics and education. Similarly, we found that language supports were helpful to UC. Research shows that school leaders are able to influence school culture by creating culturally and linguistically appropriate environments that can foster learning (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018).

Given the living conditions, political instability, and lack of economic opportunity in some countries of origin, and the journey that forced migrants endure, almost all unaccompanied children enter US schools after taking time off from formal schooling, and without the knowledge and skills that will enable them to keep up with their US born peers. Our results highlighted these gaps in educational background and how they impede a student's ability to participate in the classroom; a finding which is consistent with those of other studies on forced migrant children (Chishti & Hipsman, 2014; Markham, 2012; Socha, Mullooly, & Jackson, 2016; Szlyk et al., 2019; USCCB, 2013). However, our results also identify the nuances and challenges associated with the decision of whether to place them according to their age or according to their academic ability. Booi and colleagues (2016) found that undocumented students faced similar struggles with determining grade placement due to age discrimination by school districts and the fear that students may not graduate by the time they lose their high school eligibility.

The results of our study emphasized that having multiple players (including teachers, school mental health professionals, interpreters, and community partners) at the table allowed for more work to be accomplished and that everyone's strengths and resources could benefit UC students. Interdisciplinary teams working within the school setting may enjoy benefits such as more effective problem solving ability, more successful advocacy, and a better understanding of roles and responsibilities among colleagues. These benefits may help improve student behavior and discipline (Holtzman, Dukes, & Page, 2012). Reynolds and Bacon (2018) recommend that school leadership financially support the use of bilingual liaisons and cultural brokers, and enable staff to work to develop community partnerships that can aid the integration of refugee students into the school system.

Our results indicate that emotional and behavioral support strategies in schools help unaccompanied immigrant students to feel welcome, and mentally prepared to handle the rigor of US schools, but participants also mentioned that there were often not enough services in place. Reynolds and Bacon (2018) agreed that mental health services in most schools should be expanded, and that schools should develop more psychoeducation programs. One participant described how a school benefited from adopting the Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support (PBIS) framework. PBIS incorporates culturally-relevant outcomes, empirically supported practices, and data to monitor the effectiveness of the practices. Policies and systems are created to support these practices (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports [PBIS], 2019). There is substantial research showing the effectiveness of PBIS models in improving equity among student groups, improving discipline outcomes, and increasing family

collaboration with the school (PBIS, 2019). However, the research does not seem to focus specifically on outcomes for UC or immigrant students.

The need for safety, belonging, love, and respect has long been studied (Maslow, 1962). Within the school setting, the feelings of being valued and included, encouraged by others (especially peers), supported by teachers, involved in the classroom, and participating in extracurricular activities, all contribute to a sense of belonging to a school (Maurizi, Ceballo, Epstein-Ngo, & Cortina, 2013). Our results are consistent with these findings in that participants also mentioned the importance of teacher support, peer support, and extracurricular activities for UC students. Ham, Yang and Cha (2017), found that immigrant students were more likely to feel a weak sense of belonging than US-born students, confirming the importance of these support systems for UC and immigrant students.

School was mentioned as a key component to helping UC students integrate into their communities and to form relationships with their native-born peers. This assertion is consistent with existing literature (Birman, Weinstein, Chan & Beehler, 2007; Crea et al., 2018; Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). However, participants said that the struggles UC students face as they explore the cultural norms within the school system include understanding expectations, classroom rules, and navigating social and romantic relationships. Szlyk and colleagues (2019) found a similar theme as students described the *hard landing* they felt upon entering US classrooms because they were unfamiliar with classroom practices and the amount of time and work required in a US school.

Health and mental health challenges were another theme frequently mentioned by participants in this study. Service providers empathized with UC students who overcame the hardship of the journey to the US, describing the ways that UC overcome their trauma through the assistance of teachers and social workers. However, there was also significant discussion around the unmet needs of these students and how schools need more bilingual/bicultural school mental health professionals, mentors, and supports within the school system. Szlyk and colleagues (2019) discussed the role that social workers can have in advocating for the social and emotional needs of newcomer students through extra services, better communication, and IEPs. Similarly, Reynolds and Bacon (2018) suggest that schools have (1) psychoeducational programs incorporating the use of the arts, (2) the ability to refer students out to community-based mental and behavioral health providers, and (3) create school-based mental health initiatives in collaboration with licensed clinicians experienced in treating trauma; in order to effectively meet the needs of refugee students in mainstream schools. However, the results of this study add to the existing research by looking from the perspective of service providers who focus their work with unaccompanied children.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study**

This paper addresses a gap in the academic literature by explaining challenges and best practices in school systems specifically for unaccompanied immigrant students; a unique community at the intersection of immigrants, undocumented persons and Latinx groups. We incorporated the perspectives of many service providers to provide well-rounded perspectives, but the voice of UC students themselves is missing because they are in the custody of the federal government and unable to participate in research studies.

Additionally, the focus groups being reported in this study were conducted in 2016, before the current presidential administration began and therefore we suspect that the experiences of unaccompanied immigrant students have changed over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides unique and new information about unaccompanied immigrant student's well-being in schools and lays the groundwork for future studies and improvements in day to day practices.

### **Implications**

The information learned from this study can provide guidance for school personnel, researchers, and policy makers in order to improve the experiences of unaccompanied immigrant students in US public schools, and their outcomes. We share implications for research, practice, policy, and education below.

More research is needed on the social and emotional well-being of unaccompanied immigrant students in schools (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018; Evans, Perez-Aponte, & McRoy, 2019). We recommend that future studies involve mixed methods to dive deeper into specific research questions such as understanding the effect of cultural clashes and lack of preparedness for school on the social and emotional well-being of UC students. In doing so, we recommend the use of standardized measures, ideally repeatedly, to better assess change over time as UC become familiar in their new school environment. We hope that the experiences of UC early in the orientation phase to school will vary from that at time of graduation. Additionally, research on experiences in school would be enhanced if the sampled is drawn from the school rather than from social service agencies as there may be unaccompanied children in the school who are not actively receiving services. Lastly, there is a need for program evaluation methods to be



used in order to assess the effectiveness of support strategies implemented in schools. If the aforementioned program evaluations are done for support strategies within the schools, and are found effective, we can advocate for the expansion of services to more students and more schools through grant applications.

School systems with high numbers of unaccompanied immigrant students should critically reflect upon the available services for these students including school orientation, bilingual and bicultural staff, ESL services, mental health professionals and programs and community connections to determine if they are doing enough to meet the needs of local UC students. Schools with fewer numbers of immigrant or UC students also need to be doing critical reflections and may need to rely more heavily on community agencies to supplement programming that cannot be justified within the school, or may need to raise funds to ensure they are not ignoring the human rights of students in terms of educational potential.

Advocating for increased funding, or more services with principals and the school district may be needed. Additionally, some districts may have more success if they collaborate across schools and pool resources together. Offering orientation materials and classes for UC students and caregivers is one concrete way to address the issues of cultural class and to begin to address the preparedness for school by better understanding the gaps in formal education, conducting proper assessments, and conveying expectations.

Policies and procedures are a large area of opportunity when it comes to equity for unaccompanied immigrant students. Many schools have policies related to academics for ESL or English Language Learner (ELL) students, but these are not often inclusive of

all immigrants as some arrive to the US with adequate English skills, and are often focused solely on language acquisition (OELA, 2019). Our results suggest that school districts should think through the implications of grade placement, and create guidelines for handling these situations, while recognizing that sometimes the best answer will need to be individualized. For districts with a newcomer school, there could be specific policies to address when and how to create transitions from newcomer school to local school. There should be equivalent (or similar) attention given to the transition between high school and college to ensure that guidance counselors and other school personnel are doing what they can to support UC students who wish to further their education. At the macro level, work is needed to improve school policies and practices to ensure that the human right of access to education is given to UC.

More education could be provided to a wide variety of service providers in order to enhance the knowledge base and build skills. This should ultimately improve the school welcome and academic trajectory for unaccompanied immigrant students attending US public schools. Holtzman, Dukes, and Page (2012) recommend the use of interdisciplinary courses for graduate students as a way to build the framework for working across professions when they enter careers within public school settings. Multiple authors recommend more training for service providers on working with UC and immigrant populations (Evans, Diebold, & Calvo, 2018; Finno-Velasquez & Detlaff, 2018; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). There is opportunity to combine these ideas and offer interdisciplinary trainings, conversations, and skill building sessions among teacher, school administrators, school mental health staff and nurses, school social workers, community partners, and caregivers related to unaccompanied immigrant students.

## **Conclusion**

While many unaccompanied immigrant students struggle to adjust to and succeed within their school setting, there are also many promising practices happening in schools that are able to ease the challenges. Each school and school district has different resources, knowledge, and capacity to serve this unique population. Individual factors such as language barriers, the student's prior education and preparedness for school in the US, ability to navigate cultural clashes, as well as health and mental health challenges can complicate the educational potential for UC. Schools that offer supports in terms of academics, language, emotional, and behavioral needs are beneficial to UC, especially when done in collaboration with other service providers and community members. We recommend that support services expand to meet the needs of UC students, and that more research be conducted to better understand effectiveness of programming, and to build evidence-based practices specific to this population.

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**CHAPTER IV: PATHS TO SELF SUFFICIENCY FOR YOUTH SERVED  
THROUGH THE UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINOR FOSTER CARE  
PROGRAM IN THE UNITED STATES**

### 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 uses ecological theory to examine 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 ( $\beta=0.02, p<0.01$ ).

**Keywords:** Unaccompanied refugee minor; unaccompanied immigrant children; self-sufficiency; foster care; integration; immigrant

## 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 spike in 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 or Australia despite their existence since the 1970s. Therefore, this paper aims to add to the literature base on unaccompanied refugee minors.

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 URMs 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.

### **Immigrant Integration**

The term “immigrant integration” represents “the changes that both immigrants and their descendants – and the society they have joined – undergo in response to migration” (Walters & Pineau, 2015, p.19). Integration is a bi-directional process where both the immigrant and the host community become more similar (Alba & Nee, 2009; Brown & Bean, 2006; Waters & Pineau, 2015) and consists of multiple dimensions including: political and civic, spatial, socioeconomic, sociocultural, family, and health (Waters & Pineau, 2015). Other dimensions of integration relate to immigrant demographics such as country of origin, race and ethnicity, age, fertility rates, gender, educational attainment, income, occupation, and legal status (Waters & Pineau, 2015), as these are all factors that can change the life trajectory and opportunities that one is given. However, it should be noted that policies are by nature top down and therefore even immigrant friendly policies may not reflect the bidirectional process of immigrant integration.

The integration of children who are immigrants and refugees into their new communities is important to protect their human rights and advance the likelihood of their ability to participate in society. More research has been done on the integration of unaccompanied children in other countries (Baffoe, 2011; Bell, 2005; Kohli, 2006; Kohli, 2011; Wimelius, Eriksson, Isaksson, & Ghazinour, 2017) but research on this population in the US is still limited.



The URM program in the US 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, Baolian Qin, Bates, Luster & Saltarelli, 2011) and Eritrean youth (Socha, Mullooly & Jackson, 2016). 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 URM 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.

### **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).

However, as noted in Vongkhamphra, Davis and Adem (2011), some refugee resettlement agencies have broadened their mission to be more holistic and achieve “self-sufficiency through encouragement, education and support” (p. 250).

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). There are currently 29 URM programs in 15 different states which are overseen by either Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

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 Refugee Children and those Served by the URM Program**

Many factors can influence the integration and economic self-sufficiency of youth served by the URM program, including English proficiency, employment status, education, length of time in care, and country of origin.

**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 12<sup>th</sup> 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). Evans et al. (2019) found that while 60% of URMs 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 URMs were exceptionally motivated when it came to learning English. For refugee children, ESL instruction should go beyond the language skills and work to create a supportive environment that promotes student well-being, addressing gaps in cognitive skills and concepts of literacy, and helps students to build an understanding of the world (Scanlan, 2011). Teachers of refugee students agree that learning English is a valuable skill (Karam, Kibler & Yoder, 2017). 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 (Evans et al., 2019). 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 (Evans et al., 2019).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Human Rights Framework**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) outlines the basic rights that all people should have regardless of their “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (United Nations, 1948, p.2). Multiple of the hypothesized predictors of self-sufficiency in this study are protected by the UDHR. For example, Article 23 protects a UC’s right to employment and equal pay by saying “(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. And (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work” (p.6). Article 26 protects a UC’s right to education, both in primary, secondary, and at the college level: “(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education

shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.” It is important to acknowledge that these protections exist in policy but that in practice UC are sometimes denied enrollment in school (Booi et al., 2016) or paid lower wages (Evans et al., 2019) which could have an influence on the statistical model presented in this paper and their odds of achieving self-sufficiency.

### **Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Framework**

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological framework discusses how people do not live in isolation but rather are connected to, and influenced by the environment around them. The larger social system is divided into layers including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, through all of which a refugee is interconnected (Ostrander, Melville & Berthold, 2017). Shamama-tus-Sabah (2011) suggests that refugee children experience chaos and disruption at every level of the social system. The microsystem level looks at factors that are close to the person such as language development, acculturative stress, and friendships (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010). The mesosystem looks at familial characteristics (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010) such as being part of a foster family or group home living environment for UC and unaccompanied refugee youth. The macrosystem includes the school and community, whereas the chronosystem encompasses events over the lifespan, the national political climate, and public opinion (Becker & Todd, 2017; Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010). The political climate and public opinion can influence how immigrants are seen and welcomed into our communities.



An ecological framework has frequently been used when looking at issues around immigrant integration. For example, Ostrander, Melville, and Berthold (2017) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework to look at economic, political, and social determinants that affect refugees upon arrival to the US. They recommend that social workers employ a multi-dimensional treatment approach to understand how refugees survive in the sociopolitical environment of the US. Torres, Santiago, Walts, and Richards (2018) assessed the influence of immigration policies on the mental health of Central American youth and recommended that social work practitioners use a social-ecological approach when assessing clients for immigration-related stressors in their lives. Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, and de Lardemelle (2010) used an ecological framework with immigrant youth to understand academic engagement where they looked at individual, family, school, and the larger community when examining cognitive, relational, and behavioral dimensions of student engagement, recognizing the interconnectedness of all these layers (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010). They found that GPA decreased for most youth with increased time in the US, possibly due to larger issues such as depression and anxiety, family separation, or perception of school violence. Therefore, they recommended that school counselors help youth not only to remediate behaviors but also to promote positive youth development, which may help prevent negative outcomes (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010).

Using social ecological theory, Wimelius et al. (2017) considered housing, employment, educational attainment, and health outcomes as the influential factors of integration. They found that these outcomes were often stunted due to macrosystem factors such as a lack of coordination between stakeholders and a lack of clear political

vision around integration. They emphasize that analyses based on social-ecological systems theory suggest that “children’s development and integration must be understood by investigating the connection of these layers or systems” (Wimelius, 2017). Reynolds & Bacon (2018) used ecological systems theory to demonstrate how the pre-flight, resettlement, and integration processes all influence refugee students in their school system. In their study of the resilience among URM from Sudan, Carlson, Cacciatore, and Klimek (2012) recommended that future studies on URM utilize the ecological systems approach. Therefore, the current study is guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological framework to assess the individual characteristics (legal eligibility), microsystem characteristics (length of time in the URM program and English proficiency), and macrosystem characteristics (education and employment) (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010) and how these factors influence the social systems through which emancipated URM succeed economically.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

This study is designed to assess the relationships among predictors and their influence on the outcome of self-sufficiency for unaccompanied youth aging out of the URM foster care program. Therefore, 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. LIRS collects data on each youth at the time that they discharge from the URM program. A staff member, typically the case manager, uses his or her 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 Boston College 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. These analyses were approved by the University IRB.

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 each 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.

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%). The majority of these children left to live with family members, and therefore self-sufficiency was a less relevant metric. 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 URMs 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-360<sup>6</sup> 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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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

Table 4.1. 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%)
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 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 4.2. 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 4.3. 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 4.4. Unstandardized Maximum Likelihood Estimates for Total and Indirect Effects on Self- Sufficiency (n=347)

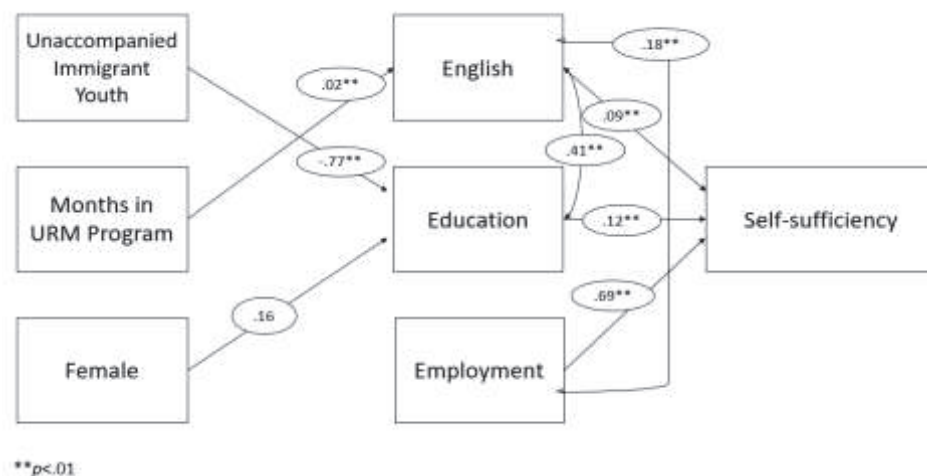
<i>Relationships</i>	Unstandardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Standard Error
Months in URM foster care to English	0.02**	0.002
UC to Education	-0.77**	0.11
Education to self-sufficiency	0.12**	0.03
Employment to self-sufficiency	0.69**	0.03
English to self-sufficiency	0.09**	0.03
Female to education	0.16	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  $\Sigma$  (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, Brown 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 4.1. Unstandardized Estimates for Path Analysis Model





## 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's 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 & Bachmeier, 2016), which can be seen as a violation of their human rights as the UDHR protects their right to employment and says that language is not a reason to discriminate (United Nations, 1948).

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 see understand the influence of these predictors on long-term self-sufficiency and success as adults rather than solely preparation for adulthood. 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 and other unaccompanied youth 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), information about income as it relates to poverty level, would enable service providers to capture more valid data for the predictors of mental health, and income. Additionally, the Child and Adolescent Support Scale (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, and Gray 2013) looks at support from parents, friends and social media networks and could be really useful to assess the social support networks of URM's,

however the authors would recommend that the questions on parents be repeated twice-once for biological parents, and once for foster parents/current caretakers. Additionally, a wider variety of important variables should be included in existing data collection methods. Information regarding the time before entry to the URM program 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 should be noted. Data about the youth's time in URM care such as 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 welcoming communities, mental and physical health status, and utilization of mentoring and tutoring programs should be tracked.

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 economic gain the future. 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. 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. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979) highlights the need to consider predictors at the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem levels, which is consistent with the ideas of integration clinical and macro level factors in a social work analysis. The Human Rights Framework reminds us that UC

may be limited by structures that exist in US communities, and we as social workers need to continue to fight against these violations of human rights (Katiuzhinsky & Okech, 2014). 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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## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

## **Introduction**

This three paper dissertation was designed to gain a deeper understanding of human rights violations faced by unaccompanied immigrant children (UC) living in foster care in the United States. The first paper sought to understand the macro and community level facilitators that influence the adjustment of UC to the US. The second paper was developed to understand the challenges to formal education for unaccompanied children and the strategies that service providers and schools are using to overcome these challenges. The third paper examined the predictors of self-sufficiency for unaccompanied immigrant and refugee minors aging out of foster care. Together, these papers address three common areas where UC struggle in the US: navigating and participating in the local community, school, and preparation for adulthood, all of which are necessary in order to succeed in life in the US as an adult.

### **Human Rights Perspective**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was drafted with the goal of providing an outline that would guarantee basic rights for every person everywhere. The UDHR was ratified in December of 1948 and consists of 30 articles outlining specific rights that should be protected for all people regardless of their “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (United Nations, 1948, p. 2). Given that the UDHR states that rights should be protected for all, all 30 UDHR articles apply to UC as they are protected regardless of their race and skin color, lack of English skills, religious beliefs, country of birth, and lack of legal status in the US (United Nations, 1948).

When human rights are being met, each person is able to live a life that contains freedom, dignity, security, and equality (Santiago et al., 2015). However, with the current political rhetoric in the United States, unaccompanied children are sometimes referred to as less-than-human, and they are therefore often treated unfairly in a manner that violates their human rights. These violations have been documented in terms of UC being held for unjustifiably long periods of time in detention (Hauslohner & Sacchetti, 2019), denied enrollment to school (Booi et al., 2016), prescribed psychotropic medication when it was not necessary for their well-being (Gonzales, 2018), sexually assaulted while in custody (Gonzales, 2019), and denied medical and mental health care (Krueger, Hargrove, & Jones, 2019). In addition, the United States in recent years has decreased the human rights protections for immigrants migrating in the US in search of safety (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Professionals across the globe have been aware of these human rights violations for years. For example, in 2015, the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee published a document that explains the reasons for migration and ways in which UC's human rights are threatened and violated, with the purpose of making recommendations about how to protect the human rights of unaccompanied immigrant children and adolescents (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015). In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly published a formal resolution acknowledging the need to reconfirm a commitment to maintain the human rights of children who are unaccompanied (United Nations General Assembly, 2017).

From the framework of the UHDR, there are a multitude of human rights violations that UC experience in the United States as outlined below:

- Article 1 indicates that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations, 1948, p. 2). Because UC lack legal documents to permanently live in the US, they are not given the same rights as other children in terms of eligibility to enroll in community based programs, apply for driver’s licenses and sometimes to enroll in public schools.  
  
Additionally, there is not always a “spirit of brotherhood” among the general population in the US when it comes to treating this population with dignity as many face trauma exposures in the US which can lead to depression and suicidal ideation (Berger Cardoso, 2018).
- Article 9 of the UDHR states, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile” (United Nations, 1948, p. 3). Despite this statute, some unaccompanied children are being held in Border Patrol Stations for periods of time that are longer than the federal guidelines (Hauslohner & Sacchetti, 2019).
- Article 14 states, “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution” (United Nations, 1948, pp. 3-4). Refugees have long been allowed to enter the US and have been provided with a number of benefits and supports to help them succeed in their new home. Under the current administration the number of refugees coming to the US has drastically decreased (Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions, 2019). UC from the Northern Triangle are not given the formal protections of refugees even though many are seeking safety from persecutions they have faced in home country (Gamboa, 2014; UNHCR, 2014).



- Article 22 explains, “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to...economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality” (United Nations, 1948, p. 6). The findings from Chapter II of this dissertation suggest that UC face undue barriers to community participation including access to extracurricular and job preparation programs due to lack of legal status.
- Article 23 reads, “(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. And (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work” (United Nations, 1948, p. 6). Despite this, Evans and colleagues (2019) found that URM students worked fewer hours per week and received lower hourly wages when compared to youth exiting from domestic foster care.
- Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” (United Nations, 1948, p. 7). UC in shelter have been denied medical and mental health care (Krueger, Hargrove, & Jones, 2019).
- Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening

of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace” (United Nations, 1948, p. 7). UC are being denied educational programming when in shelter facilities (Romo & Rose, 2019) but also face struggles enrolling in public schools (Booi et al., 2016) and accessing higher education (Evans & Unangst, in press; Hines, 2018).

- Article 27 outlines that “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (p. 7). The results from Chapter II of this dissertation suggest that UC struggle to participate in their local communities due to the fear and discrimination they face in the community.

The social work profession is rooted in the community organizing and advocacy work done by the Hull House in Chicago in the early 1900s, much of which was to benefit immigrants in the community (DiNitto & Johnson, 2010). More recently, authors suggest that many social workers are hyper-focused on the day to day needs of clients and may not be thinking about human rights violations and the larger macro issues at hand (Katiuzhinsky & Okech, 2014). From a macro perspective, we need to remember that social workers not only address the immediate needs of clients, but also work to enhance their individual human rights through initiatives such as coalition building, engaging community members in decision making processes, research initiatives, and promoting policies that honor human dignity (Santiago et al., 2015). All social workers have a duty to advocate for both the well-being and the rights of unaccompanied children

(Androff, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). The International Federation of Social Workers (2014) explains that social workers are well situated to make a difference in the lives of these clients by protecting their human rights through use of their skills at both the individual and community levels of intervention (Mapp, McPherson, Androff, & Gabel, 2019; Santiago et al., 2015; Teixeira, Richards-Schuster, Sprague-Martinez, Augsberger, & Evans, under review).

### **Implications**

Multiple implications emerged in this dissertation, many of which are relevant to the larger research, practice, and policy agendas that will benefit unaccompanied immigrant children. Below are implications related to research, practice, and policy. In this section I will begin by reviewing the implications that are specific to only one chapter, and then capture the larger ideas that apply to multiple.

**Implications from Chapter II.** The results of Chapter II, entitled, “Macro Level Facilitators and Barriers to Adjustment for Unaccompanied Immigrant Children in the United States,” provide a strong foundation about the role that the community plays in the adjustment process of unaccompanied immigrant children in foster care. This study highlights a number of community level facilitators of adjustment that can assist UC including welcoming communities, development of community relationships, inter-agency collaboration, and the role of the church as an institution. Therefore, future research should include more targeted evaluations of these facilitators to better understand the impact they have on the lives of UC.

The results of the study indicate that social workers and community based practitioners could expand and improve services to aid the adjustment of UC to the US.

For example, at the programmatic level, (1) service plans could be amended to focus on matching UC with mentors and individuals in the community who can provide support through personal relationships, and (2) transportation can be built into agency protocol to ensure it does not pose a barrier for UC as they participate in the local community. At the level of the foster care agency level, (1) directors should continue to develop interagency collaborations and communication as a means of improving service delivery for clients and expanding the impact of the work being done, (2) agencies should continue to work alongside churches, encouraging church members to donate their time and resources to the foster care agencies, and (3) foster care staff should create peer-to-peer learning and discussion opportunities for foster parents and their biological children in order to spread knowledge and better prepare everyone for the placement of UC into their homes.

**Implications from Chapter III.** The results of Chapter III, entitled, “Support strategies: The perspective of service providers on educational challenges and promising practices for unaccompanied immigrant students in the United States,” provide information and guidance for school staff across a variety of roles in order to improve the experiences of unaccompanied immigrant students in US public schools. Our results showed that there are individual factors that pose challenges to academic potential including language barriers, a lack of prior education and preparedness for school in the US, difficulties navigating cultural clashes, and physical and mental health challenges. Schools that offer supports to UC in terms of academics, language, emotional, and behavioral needs are equipping UC with the skills to reach their full potential and succeed, especially when these services are offered in collaboration with other service providers and community members.

More research is needed on the social and emotional well-being of unaccompanied immigrant students in schools however building partnerships and gaining trust to conduct research in schools can sometimes be challenging. Additionally, not many longitudinal studies have taken place given the relatively recent rise of UC students. Future studies should utilize standardized measures and develop longitudinal research designs to better assess change over time and long-term success of UC. School districts should critically reflect upon the available services for UC students including school orientation, bilingual and bicultural staff, ESL services, mental health professionals, and programs and community connections to determine if they are adequately meeting the needs of local UC students.

**Implications from Chapter IV.** The results of Chapter IV, entitled, “Paths to Self Sufficiency for Youth Served Through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Foster Care Program in the United States,” quantitatively explored the predictors of self-sufficiency for unaccompanied immigrant and refugee young adults as they left the foster care system. Our results indicate that there are 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 influences self-sufficiency indirectly through both English proficiency ( $\beta=0.02, p<0.01$ ) and educational attainment ( $\beta=0.02, p<0.01$ ).

Since education, English language skills, and gainful employment are all important factors in promoting self-sufficiency for unaccompanied immigrants and refugees after foster care, service providers should include all of these aspects in written

service plans for their clients. There are multiple ways to increase the chances of success within these domains including tutoring, after school and summer programs, attendance at English classes (both in school and in the community), and job training or preparation such as help with resume writing, finding job advertisements, and mock job interviews. Because many UC come to the US with the goal of working and sending money home (Rumbaut & Ima 1988; Socha, Mullooly, & Jackson, 2016), it is important that service providers encourage school attendance and English classes to increase the odds of obtaining a better job in the future.

Future research could assess the effectiveness of program components including summer camps, ethnically matched foster homes, international school placements, mentoring, and tutoring. Grant writing, advocating for increased funding, and creative use of volunteers can increase their access to support systems (e.g. tutoring, mentoring, job preparation).

### **Overall Research Implications**

Given the increase in unaccompanied children arriving to the US in the last decade, more research is needed to better understand the experiences of unaccompanied children, to advocate for policy changes, and to increase knowledge and skill development for working with UC in US communities. Program evaluations are also needed to ensure that social service providers are delivering the best possible and most effective services. Future research would be more holistic and meaningful if it were to include the voices of unaccompanied children themselves. At this time, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has precluded researchers from accessing UC who are under the custody of the ORR. Therefore, allowing researchers access to UC who are

under the custody of ORR would require significant advocacy efforts but is something towards which researchers and practitioners should work to produce the most effective and relevant research. The majority of existing research related to UC is cross-sectional, and much is derived from existing data or administrative data (Crea, Hasson III, Evans, Berger Cardoso, & Underwood, 2017; Jani, Underwood, & Ranweiler, 2016; Schmidt, 2017). As a result, agencies should critically assess their data collection procedures and ensure that the critical outcomes variables such as educational attainment, employment status, legal status, mental health, and well-being indicators are being collected on a regular basis over time. The research agenda would be improved by the inclusion of longitudinal research to better understand how UC are faring over time.

In order to enhance the quality of research happening with UC, agencies working with unaccompanied immigrant children should consider the implementation of standardized measures as part of their data collection processes (as indicated in Chapter IV; Crea, Lopez, Taylor, & Underwood, 2017). There are many standardized measures that could be used to assess mental health of UC such as the Child Post Traumatic Symptom Scale (CPSS) (Foa, Treadwell, Johnson, & Feeny, 2001), the Refugee Health Screener - 15 (RHS-15) (Farmer, 2011), and the UCLA PTSD Reaction Index for DSM-5 (Behavioral Health Innovations, 2018). There are also existing tools to assess school well-being including the School Climate Measure-Revised (Zullig et al., 2015), the Parent Empowerment and Efficacy Measure (Freiberg, Homel, & Branch, 2014), and the Olweus Bullying Scale (Strohmeier, Kärnä, & Salmivalli, 2011). There are additionally standardized measures that are more holistic and take into account a variety of areas of life such as the Child and Adolescent Support Scale (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss,

& Gray 2013). Standardized measures would enable researchers to understand how a given sample of UC score on the aforementioned constructs. Generally speaking, standardized measures reduce interviewer error, and the questions have been tested to ensure that the wording is addressing the specific desired outcome (Singleton & Straits, 2010). However, some of the struggle to incorporate the use of standardized measures with this population lays in the fact that not many standardized measures are inclusive of the experiences of UC as they were written for other groups (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018), and therefore researchers need to first pilot test and validate these measures for the UC population.

### **Overall Practice Implications**

Social workers have been working with unaccompanied children in shelter care, foster care programs, and in the community for many years. Several participants cited in this dissertation expressed an interest in more training specific to working with UC. These suggestions included training not only for social workers and mental health professionals but also for legal and court staff, foster families, school personnel, and members of the community. It should be noted that Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), the national agency that oversees and monitors the Long Term Foster Care Program (LTFC) and the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) foster care programs that were part of this dissertation, do provide ongoing training to their staff across the country both virtually and through in-person onsite visits. Foster agencies are responsible for providing training their local foster parents. Therefore, this implication for practice could be taken as a recommendation to include wider audiences in the training modules that are developed so that the knowledge reaches more persons and so



that the dynamics and conversation in the room may change as interdisciplinary professionals learn together (Holtzman, Dukes, & Page, 2012).

As with all social service programs and nonprofits, an increase of funding would increase opportunities for UC. Staff at the national level should consider applying for foundation grants to expand programming and test new and innovative practices. At the same time, local foster care agencies should be aware of opportunities in their local communities or through foundations to apply for additional funding to benefit UC.

Collaboration was another cross-cutting theme throughout this dissertation. It was noted that partnerships between school personnel and outside agencies with expertise on immigrant issues and trauma were beneficial. Similarly, community-academic partnerships enabled the school district to implement a systematic and thoughtful approach to serving UC (Schapiro, Gutierrez, Blackshaw, & Chen, 2018). There was also discussion around the ways that foster care agencies collaborate with other nonprofits, churches, legal, and medical providers in their local communities in an effort to share knowledge and resources.

### **Overall Policy Implications**

At the national level, it would be beneficial to push for comprehensive immigration reform (Migration Policy Institute, 2019) and policies that are more welcoming towards immigrants, especially forced migrants such as refugees and unaccompanied children (Androff, 2016). Social workers should be advocating for an increase in the number of refugees allowed to enter the US under the presidential determination (Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions, 2019) as admittance to the US is one of the major ways in which we advocate for the human rights of these

people by offering refuge in a safe and permanent place. There have been attempts to pass legislation that would enable a pathway to citizenship in the US for the undocumented immigrants who came to the US as children, also known as Dreamers (Svajlenka, 2019), and social workers should continue to advocate for these policies as it could enable many UC to create a permanent and stable life in the US. Some UC apply for trafficking visas in the US as a means of legal protection and ability to remain in the US. However, because the number of visas for each year is limited to 5,000 and often fill up, creating wait lists (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.), it would be beneficial to advocate for an increase in the number of available visas.

At the state and community levels there are additional ways to advocate for the best interests of UC through policy change. First, social workers and community members alike should push more governors and local officials to declare their areas Sanctuary States, Counties, and Cities and to embrace welcoming policies towards immigrants (Welcoming America, n.d.). As discussed in Chapter II of this dissertation, there is an opportunity to create bystander trainings and provide information about UC to the general public in an effort to increase empathy and knowledge with the hopes of changing attitudes and behaviors of community members. Macro social workers, social work professors, and community organizers are well positioned to be the leaders in these initiatives.

At the agency level, there are unlimited opportunities to improve policies and practices that will benefit UC in our communities. For example, both school districts and individual schools can adopt policies that are more welcoming towards UC such as mandating proper interpretation and translation of documents, no longer denying UC

enrollment in school, and mandating that all school staff receive some training related to UC students. LIRS national staff and local foster care agencies can appeal to ORR when they see unfit policies and ask for specific amendments and adaptations to be made in order to advocate for the best interest of the child. Mental health agencies can establish policies that would offer higher salaries or incentives for bilingual and bicultural clinicians.

### **Overall Implications for Social Work Education**

In order to best prepare the next generation of social workers for a career of working across many diverse populations, social work educators should consider adding more content around unaccompanied immigrant children and their undocumented families into generalist social work curricula. To accomplish this task, additional research could be conducted to identify the specific topics that are most relevant in their future jobs and develop training that will best equip them – as foster care staff, administrators, and community agency staff members – to help UC overcome community barriers to adjustment.

The population of UC coming to the US has shifted over the years in terms of country of origin, language, age, etc. and may continue to shift as the push and pull factors for migration continue to change. Therefore, it is important that trainings are adaptable and relevant to current events and needs. These trainings should be made available in a multitude of modalities to meet the diverse needs of different learners and to reach a wide audience. For example, there could be live webinars that encourage question and answer; in person trainings at schools, foster care agencies, churches, and

other community sites; and recorded online trainings that people can watch at their leisure.

More education could be provided to a wide variety of service providers in order to enhance the knowledge base, build skills, and ultimately improve the school welcome and academic trajectory for unaccompanied children attending US public schools.

Holtzman, Dukes, and Page (2012) recommend that use of interdisciplinary courses for graduate students as a way to build the framework for working across professions when they enter careers within public school settings. Multiple authors recommend more training for service providers on working with UC and immigrant populations (Evans, Diebold, & Calvo, 2018; Finno-Velasquez & Detlaff, 2018; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018).

There is opportunity to combine these ideas and offer interdisciplinary trainings and conversations among teachers, school administrators, school mental health staff and nurses, school social workers, community partners, and parents in training and skill building sessions related to unaccompanied immigrant students. Reynolds and Bacon (2018) highlight that trainings are not designed to develop new strategies or knowledge but rather to help professionals incorporate new perspectives and change the way in which they approach topics.

### **Conclusion**

As a whole, this dissertation provides useful and timely knowledge on unaccompanied children living in US communities. The main takeaways include implications and recommendations for research, practice, policy, and social work education. Moving forward, it is important that research endeavors include the voices of unaccompanied children themselves, is longitudinal in nature, and includes the use of

standardized measures. Recommendations for foster care agencies and service providers working with UC include providing more training opportunities, advocacy for additional funding, and collaboration with external organizations and persons including nonprofits, churches, legal, medical providers, and mentors.

In terms of policy recommendations, social workers and community members should advocate for welcoming policies and for their jurisdiction to become a sanctuary city/state and build awareness and empathy through bystander trainings. Other implications for policy include advocating for more bilingual and bicultural clinicians, appealing to ORR when policies changes are needed, and helping schools to use interpretation services more widely. Schools of social work and social work faculty should consider adding more content and case studies specific to unaccompanied immigrant children into generalist social work curricula, including courses that count for core curricula as a means to engage an interdisciplinary audience.

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## **Appendix 1A: Definitions**

Below are definitions of key terms that will be discussed throughout this three-paper dissertation. First are the common classifications of immigrants that are relevant to the topic of forced migration, second is a list of locations, and last in a list of key concepts and programs.

### **Immigrant Classifications**

**Asylum-seekers.** Asylum is a form of immigration relief granted in many countries around the world. In the United States, an asylum seeker is defined as a person who has suffered persecution or faces a significant fear of persecution due to “race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion” (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2018a, p.1). People who fit this description are eligible to apply for an asylum visa within through the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, but meeting this criterion is not a guaranteed legal status in the US.

**Forced migrants.** Forced migrant is an overarching term often used to describe a range of people who have been coerced into leaving their home for reasons such as natural disaster, threats to one’s safety, or famine (International Organization for Migration, 2019). This term includes refugees, asylum-seekers, most unaccompanied alien children, and internally displaced persons.

**Internally displaced person (IDP).** An internally displaced person is someone who has been forced to leave their home for reasons of conflict, natural disaster, violence, or violations of human rights but whom has not crossed an international border, and

therefore is unable to apply for asylum or refugee status (International Organization of Migration, 2019).

**Immigrant.** Immigrant is an overarching term used to describe “any alien in the United States”, (where alien is any person who is not a citizen or national) whether documented or undocumented, and generally refers to a person who intends to stay permanently (Department of Homeland Security, 2018, p.1).

**Migrant.** An international migrant generally refers to someone who moves and therefore changes their country residence, regardless of the reason for migration, length of time they intend to stay, or their legal status (UNHCR, 2019b).

**Nonimmigrant.** People who were born outside of the US, but who have been granted permission to reside in the US on a temporary basis, are not considered immigrants (IRS, 2018).

**Refugees.** Many forced migrants around the world apply for refugee status through the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) in hopes of being resettled as a refugee and restarting their life in a new (and more stable) country. Protections for refugees were put in place by the 1951 Refugee Convention. The guidelines for a refugee are someone who has fled their home due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution “based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group”, war, violence, or conflict and who cannot return home safely (UNHCR, 2019b; U.S. DOS, n.d.a, p.1).

**Unaccompanied children (UC).** There are multiple different classifications of unaccompanied children, all of whom are under the age of 18 and not living with an adult whom “by law or custom, is responsible for doing so” (UNHCR, 2008, p.8). In 2017,

there were 173,800 unaccompanied and separated children around the globe (not including UC in the USA, Russia, or South Africa) (UNHCR, 2018b). In this section I will describe the differences among separated children, unaccompanied alien children in the US, and unaccompanied refugee minors.

*Separated children* is a designation used by UNHCR for young persons under the age of 18 who are separated from parents and legal guardians due to conflict, population displacement or natural disasters, but are often living in proximity to other relatives when they arrive to the first country of asylum and apply for help (UNHCR, 2008). Many of these separated children are reunited with family members due to the Best Interest Determination and family finding process (UNHCR, 2008).

However, some are not able to be reunified in which case their designation is switched to an *unaccompanied refugee minor*. Therefore, refugees under the age of 18 living overseas, often in a refugee camp or as an urban refugee, who are eligible for resettlement to the United States, but do not have a parent, guardian, or a relative available and committed to providing care to the child for their long-term (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2018). These young refugees are placed on a list and may be referred for resettlement through foster care to the United States or Australia and referred to as an Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) (Victoria State Government Health and Human Services, 2017; ORR, 2018).

In the United States, an '*unaccompanied alien child*' is someone who is under the age of 18, has no lawful immigration status in the United States, and who is 1) unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian in the United States; or (2) has no parent or legal guardian who is available to provide care (Homeland Security Act of 2002 Public



Law 107–296, 6 U.S.C. § 279). For the purposes of this dissertation, youth are referred to as unaccompanied children rather than unaccompanied alien children, given the pejorative undertones of the term ‘alien’ which hint of dehumanization. Other commonly used terms to describe these children include: unaccompanied immigrant child (UIC) and unaccompanied minor (UAM).

**Undocumented immigrant.** In the United States, some immigrants are referred to as aliens (IRS, 2018), inadmissible (DHS, 2018), illegal (IRS, 2018), or unauthorized (Pew Research Center, 2019). An undocumented person is someone who lacks legal status and documentation to reside in the United States of America and includes people who have violated the terms of their temporary visa by overstaying limit of time allowed (IRS, 2018). For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use the term undocumented in order to preserve dignity of the person.

## **Locations**

**Country of origin.** The country of origin for a forced migrant is the source of the migratory flow (IOM, 2019). This is slightly different from the country of birth, as a refugee may have been born in the refugee camp, yet may identify the country of origin as where their family fled from prior to arriving in the camp. This is also different from a person’s nationality or citizenship status (USCIS, n.d.).

**First country of asylum.** When a forced migrant flees their home and crosses an international border they are often able to apply for asylum, help from UNHCR, or begin the process to apply for asylum according to The Dublin Regulation (UNHCR & ECRE, n.d.; US Legal, 2016). The country in which this person applies for temporary asylum

status with the hopes of repatriation or resettlement is known as the first country of asylum (US Legal, 2016).

**Receiving country.** The destination country, often the third country that forced migrants will enter as part of the refugee resettlement process (International Organization of Migration, 2019). For the purposes of this dissertation, the receiving country is the United States of America.

### **Concepts and Programs**

**Best interests assessment (BIA)/ Best interests determination (BID).** In many situations when a child is unaccompanied, an assessment is conducted by UNHCR to help determine the future plans for the child. The *Best Interests Assessment (BIA)* is a thorough assessment made by trained staff, which includes the participation of the child and has the goal of assessing relatives, identifying strengths and needs of the child, securing a care plan for the immediate future, and outlining possible durable solutions for the child (UNHCR, 2008).

A *Best Interest Determination (BID)* is similar to a BIA but is a more formal process, reaching a final decision, guided by strict procedural safeguards in which the staff member is making a formal decision of what will happen next for the child (UNHCR, 2008). The child's best interests are decided based on the BIA, the child's opinion, an assessment of child protection needs, and balances the many relevant factors in order to determine the best plan of action for the child's future (UNHCR, 2008).

**Bullying victimization.** A person is said to be a victim of bullying when another person says unpleasant things about or to you; when someone is teased in a way he or she does not like (rather than in a friendly and playful way), including deliberately being left

out of things such as social events or when a person is physically harmed by a peer, and when these situations occur on a repeated basis (National Centre Against Bullying, 2019). Bullying generally involves a power differential, and therefore it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight (National Centre Against Bullying, 2019).

**Office of refugee resettlement.** The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is a branch of the Administration for Children and Families that is responsible for the care and custody of unaccompanied alien children in the US in accordance with the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008.

**Refugee resettlement.** The US refugee resettlement program, also known as The Refugee Admissions Program, began with the passing of the Displaced Persons Act (1948) and was strengthened with the United States Refugee Act of 1980. Since 1975, the United States has accepted more refugees than any other country around the globe, about 3.3 million refugees for permanent resettlement (U.S. DOS, n.d.a.). There are nine voluntary agencies which administer the US Refugee program and have about 350 affiliated offices in 190 communities across the US. Each of the nine national agencies contains a cooperative agreement with the Department of State which outlines the refugee services they will provide (U.S. DOS, n.d.a); only 2 of these agencies (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)) hold cooperative agreements to run the URM program, which is a specialized resettlement program.

**Self-reliance.** Self-reliance and self-sufficiency are terms that are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation. Self-reliance is the social and economic

ability of an immigrant to meet one's own essential needs (including things such as shelter, food, water, personal safety, protection, as well as health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity. Many refugee and immigrant programs use a self-reliance approach which refers to the idea of developing and strengthening livelihoods of immigrants, reducing their vulnerability, and reducing or eliminating the need for humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2005).

**Self-sufficiency.** Self-sufficiency is a term widely used in refugee resettlement as the primary case goal for newcomers to the United States. The idea of economic self-sufficiency is a person's ability to earn an income that is high enough to enables the family to support itself without receipt of assistance as defined by earning enough to exceed the income eligibility level for receipt of cash assistance in the state where one lives, as well as the ability to cover the daily living expenses for one's family (Tota, 2018). However, many refugee families who have reached 'economic self- sufficiency' may still be eligible to receive medical, housing, and food assistance (Tota, 2018).

**United States unaccompanied refugee minor foster care program.** Youth who are labeled as unaccompanied refugee minors by UNHCR, are eligible for resettlement to the United States and upon arrival to the US are placed into the US URM foster care program (ORR, 2018; USCCB, 2013). The local foster care agency who holds a contract for both resettlement and URM is labeled as the receiving agency and provides the living arrangements (foster home, group care, independent living, or residential treatment care) for the refugee (ORR, 2018).

Additionally, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) identified certain unaccompanied minors who are living in the US, and whom are in need of protection,

with legal eligibility, and refers them to the URM program for long term care. The majority of these minors identified by ORR arrive to the US as unaccompanied alien children (UACs) (ORR, 2018), however the main distinction between youth served by this program and other UC is that youth in the URM program have legal eligibility to remain in the US whereas UC are undocumented. Below are the legal classifications necessary for youth to enter the URM program (ORR, 2016, ORR, 2018; USCCB, 2013):

- Refugees arriving unaccompanied (Refugee Act of 1980)
- Refugees who become unaccompanied due to family breakdown in the US (8 USC 1522(d); ORR, 2016).
- 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))
- Cuban/Haitian Entrants (45 CFR 401.2)