Research Statement | Chun Liu

There were approximately 450,000 children in foster care in the United States in 2019. Among them, approximately 20,000 youth between the ages of 18 and 21 exited foster care without achieving permanency, also known as “aging out” of foster care. These transitional age foster care youth were much more vulnerable to multiple life challenges in terms of finding employment, attending college, securing a place to live, and starting a family than their peers in the general population. For example, only about 50% of them obtained a high school diploma or general educational development (GED) degree as compared to over 70% of non-foster youth. Through my own research and practice experience in working with youth in foster care, I personally witnessed the challenges they must overcome and how little support they receive from social and systemic safety nets. However, research on transitional age foster care youth and the effectiveness of independent living services remains scarce. My research primarily focuses on improving outcomes and services for transitional age foster care youth. The objectives of my research are: 1) to identify the risk and protective factors of independent living outcomes for transitional age foster care youth, 2) to identify favorable policy and practices that will improve short-term outcomes as well as long-term wellbeing of transitional age foster care youth, and 3) to develop a culturally adapted evidence-based intervention to improve positive outcomes of transitional age foster care youth. In addition, my research examines the intersection of homelessness, educational attainment, employment, behavioral health and mental health. From my perspective, my research makes a unique contribution to the field of child welfare and fills a gap in the literature.

My dissertation focuses on examining the risk and protective factors associated with independent living outcomes for transitional age foster care youth and the effectiveness of the Independent Living Programs in the United States. I use a national sample of transitional age foster care youth who receive Independent Living services and examine the factors that are associated with outcomes in areas like education, employment, housing and health. The dataset is created by merging the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) datasets. I use Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) growth curve analysis to examine the longitudinal wellbeing outcomes of a cohort at three waves (baseline at age 17 and follow-ups at ages 19 and 21). The goal of my dissertation research is threefold: 1) developing a conceptual framework that can be applied to understand the issue, 2) identifying risk and protective factors that are associated with key outcomes of transitional age foster care youth, and (3) evaluating the effectiveness of Independent Living Programs in the United States.

As a doctoral candidate at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Austin, I serve as a Child Welfare Fellow in the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing. I have the opportunity to collaborate with Dr. Rowena Fong, who is a nationally known child welfare scholar, and her team from the institute on various projects that support my research in the child welfare area. I worked with Dr. Fong in the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) project, funded through the Children’s Bureau, which implemented evidence-based interventions to increase permanency stability for youth ages 5-18 years who are involved with the child welfare system. I assisted with the data analysis, updating the codebook, and drafting the final evaluation report of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska survey, one of eight sites in this nationwide project. The final evaluation report has been published. I also worked closely with other members from the
institute on Project HOPES Evaluation and presented our findings in child maltreatment prevention from the study at the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) annual conference.

Transitional age foster care youth are facing tremendous life challenges. They are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness, unemployment, and physical and mental health illness. In order to better understand the risk and protective factors related with negative outcomes of at-risk youth, and to identify promising interventions and improve outcomes for youth in foster care, I not only improved my statistical and writing skills, but also developed my expertise in this area. To further explore factors associated with the wellbeing of disadvantaged children, I conducted several studies using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a national sample of unmarried parents and their children who are at greater risk of breaking up and living in poverty. In collaboration with Dr. Yolanda Padilla, a renowned scholar in child health and wellbeing, as well as other researchers from the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania, I co-authored articles examining the effect of various risk and preventive factors such as parenting, education or externalizing behaviors on adolescent self-rated health. The articles also explored the role mental health played in this relationship and the potential moderating effect of gender. These studies have been published in Children and Youth Services Review.

To enhance my statistical analysis skills, I completed the Portfolio in Applied Statistical Modeling program offered by the Department of Statistics and Data Sciences at The University of Texas at Austin. Through Statistics, Educational Psychology and other departments across the university, I had the opportunity to work with colleagues and faculty from interdisciplinary backgrounds and develop expertise using various statistical modeling methods, such as HLM, SEM, Multivariate Methods, and Bayesian Modeling. To fulfill the requirement of the Portfolio program, I also conducted an independent research project using advanced statistical modeling techniques under the supervision of my faculty supervisor, Dr. Kirk von Sternberg. My work “A multi-level analysis of Independent Living Program outcomes for foster care youth” was submitted to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) annual program meeting in November 2020 and has been accepted as an oral presentation.

In addition, I developed my expertise in conducting systematic reviews, scoping reviews, and meta-analysis under the supervision of Dr. Cynthia Franklin and Dr. Rowena Fong, who both have expert knowledge in this area. I was the first author on a scoping review that examines the impact of independent living programs on transitional age foster care youths’ educational outcomes. This paper was published in Children and Youth Services Review. The thematic findings of this review included: (1) educational outcomes are impacted by constant placement changes, (2) housing considerations should be paired with education, (3) acknowledging individual youth characteristics is important as well as encouraging youth to participate in independent living programs as early as possible. I also collaborated with Dr. Fong and other colleagues in the child welfare area to conduct a systematic review to examine interventions that have been effective in promoting successful reunification. The study results showed promising interventions as well as the importance of cross-system collaboration. This paper was published in Research on Social Work Practice. By conducting these systematic reviews, I not only improved my understanding of the literature in my area of research but also gained necessary knowledge to develop a conceptual framework in understanding the issue.
In the future, I will continue to explore funding and grant opportunities to conduct my research on outcomes for transitional age foster care youth. To enhance my grant writing skills, I studied under Dr. Ruben Parra-Cardona, one of the most expert grant writers in my university. To this end, I have a draft of a National Institute of Health (NIH) R34 grant proposal ready for my research agenda and will submit it after I become a faculty member. I believe these are important steppingstones in acquiring funding for future research. I will be actively looking for grants and funding from NIH organizations as well as other institutions and foundations such as the Administration for Children and Families Children’s Bureau, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Much of my research will involve working with interdisciplinary scholars, policymakers, service providers and other stakeholders. As a scholar who is early in my career, I will be seeking opportunities through multiple channels to connect with other scholars, form research alliances, and build a collaborative team. My long-term goal is to use my research on evidence-based interventions as a model to impact policymakers, administrators, and practitioners to improve the positive outcomes of all youth involved with the child welfare system and to fill a large gap in the research.