



# “A Bad Combination”: Lived Experiences of Youth Involved in the Foster Care and Juvenile Justice Systems

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## Abstract

Youth with involvement in foster care and the juvenile justice system, often called dual-status youth, are at increased risk for negative outcomes as they transition into adulthood, including homelessness, and involvement in the adult criminal justice system. Increase of interest in the phenomenon of youth dual involvement within the last decade, reveals focus on challenges associated with the dual-status population, the importance of multi-system collaboration, and foster care factors contributing to juvenile delinquency. This study aims to build on the current literature, through exploration of how dually-involved youth make sense of their experiences in the juvenile justice and foster care systems; and what youth believe are their unique challenges of being in two systems? This phenomenological study engaged ten individuals in Houston, Texas, between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, and previously involved in the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Research subjects participated in-depth, semi-structured, and audio-recorded interviews, disclosing their experiences in two systems. Interviews were transcribed and entered in the qualitative analytical program, Atlas.ti, where common themes of participant responses were extracted. Accounts from participants highlighted three key experiences: (1) experiences of and leading to dual involvement, (2) traumatic experiences, and (3) absence of normalcy. Study results are categorized based on their pathways to dual-involvement. This current study offers rich insights into how dually-involved youth make sense of their experiences in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Implications for enhanced service provision among child welfare and juvenile justice professionals are offered.

**Keywords** Dual-status youth · Juvenile justice · Foster care

Crossover youth are those with open cases and involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, whether concurrently or non-concurrently (Herz et al., 2012; Hirsch, Dierkhising, & Herz, 2018; Lee & Villagrana, 2015). These children and adolescents represent a population of increasing interest to researchers, services providers, and policymakers. While the term “crossover youth” encompasses those with current or past involvement in both systems, the term dual-status youth specifically defines youth who are legal foster care dependents, and adjudicated juvenile offenders (Herz & Fontaine, 2013; Onifade et al., 2014). The emerging research exploring the dual-involvement phenomenon focuses on challenges associated with the population, race

and gender disparities, and the importance of multi-system collaboration (Dierkhising, Herz, Hirsch, & Abbott, 2019; Haight, Bidwell, Marshall, & Khatiwoda, 2014). The substantial body of work done on crossover youth has enhanced the ability for professionals and practitioners to improve services for these young individuals. What is limited in the extant literature are studies exploring and amplifying the voices of those with lived experiences of dual involvement. This study addresses this gap. A sample of former dually involved youth in Houston, Texas were engaged. Participants shared their experiences of being involved in two systems and elaborated on their beliefs of challenges unique to their being in the foster care and juvenile justice systems.

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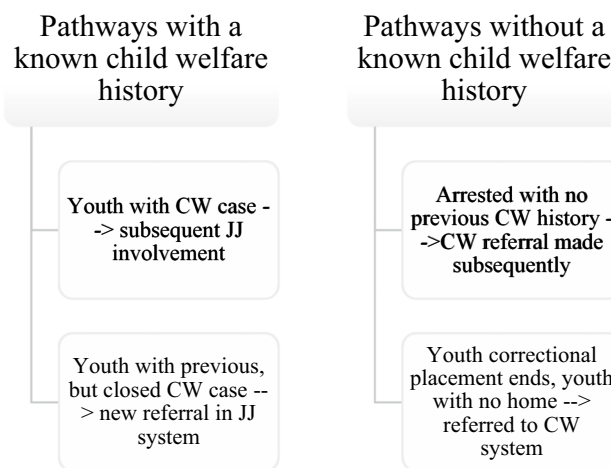
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## Dual-Status Youth

Precise data on the incidence of youth dual involvement is unclear, mainly due to the divergence in how child welfare and juvenile justice agencies collect and track data. Additionally, the transient nature of youth moving through either of these systems presents challenges in tracking as they crossover (Felix, 2016; Herz & Dierkhising, 2018; Walsh & Jagers, 2017; Wright, Spohn, Chenane, & Juliano, 2017; Wylie, 2014). Scholars with Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform developed the Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM) in 2010, with the overall objective of improving outcomes for youth dually involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Abbott & Barnett, 2018; Haight et al., 2014; Halemba, Siegel, Lord, & Zawacki, 2004). As a result, national numbers on the prevalence of dual involvement are available and informing agencies on how to better coordinate services. Studies have found that youth involved in the juvenile justice system have had some form of child welfare involvement. Recently, counties in Illinois, Ohio, and New York reported that 45–70% of youth having dual-system involvement (Herz & Dierkhising, 2018). As information on the prevalence of youth dual youth involvement continues to emerge, there is better clarity on how to best address the crossover phenomenon.

## Pathways to Dual-Involvement

The trajectory by which youth become dually involved is another critical step in understanding how to best serve the population. Youth can become dually involved through any of the following pathways: (1) youth having an open child welfare case, are arrested, and enter the juvenile justice system; (2) youth having a previous, but not current child welfare case and are arrested; (3) youth arrested with no previous child welfare history, but while involved with the juvenile system are referred to the child welfare system; and (4) youth having correctional placements and no safe home to which to return to, and thus, being referred to the child welfare system (Herz & Fontaine, 2013; Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010). These pathways are depicted in Fig. 1. Extant literature suggests the most common pathway begins with the youth entering the child welfare system, and subsequently becoming involved in the juvenile justice system (Herz & Fontaine, 2013; Herz et al., 2019). Everyday occurrences in foster care, such as multiple placement moves, and placement in congregate settings, often lead dependent youth to engage in externalizing, aggressive behaviors, landing them in the juvenile justice system



**Fig. 1** Pathways to becoming involved in juvenile justice and child welfare

(Kolivoski, Shook, Goodkind, & Kim, 2014). Sarri, Stofregen, and Ryan (2016) found that 42% of child welfare involved youth in Michigan ran away from their placements, increasing their likelihood of subsequent juvenile system contact. Further, Yang, McCuish, and Corrado (2017) used data from the Incarcerated Serious and Violent Offender Study and found a pattern of chronic offending and engagement in serious crimes for children and youth in dependent foster care.

## Characteristics of Dual-Status Youth

Tracking the prevalence of the dual-status problem has resulted in an increased the knowledge of typical characteristics of these youths. For example, dual-status youth engage in delinquency and get arrested at a younger age compared to their single-system involved counterparts (Herz et al., 2019). Further, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), identified critical characteristics of dually-involved youth in Los Angeles, California, a state reporting the highest number of foster youth in the country. Data collected from child welfare and juvenile justice agencies revealed that males represented over 60% of all dually involved youth, and nearly 40% are in congregate settings. Regarding race and gender, African-American youth are overrepresented in foster care and juvenile justice (Herz & Dierkhising, 2018), and there is an increasing number of females in the dual-status population, compared to those females solely involved in the juvenile justice system (Herz & Dierkhising, 2018; Hockenberry & Puzanchera, 2017).

The increasing number of females represented in the dual-status population shows they are more likely to be arrested for minor status offenses (Chiu, Ryan, & Herz, 2011).

Experiences of dual-status females point to their specific traumatic histories, including sexual abuse, and subsequent maltreatment in congregate foster care settings (Dierkhising et al., 2019). Moreover, while female crossover youth typically embody better levels of self-control and problem-solving skills, they remain at increased risk for substance abuse, and reduced family and peer relationships compared to their non-crossover counterparts (Lee & Villagrana, 2015).

Racial disparities, particularly of African-American children and youth, are part of the historical fabric of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. The tradition of racial inequality in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems remains salient, and the literature is saturated with evidence of the overrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities at each decision point, in these systems. Racial disparities in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems compounds when these youths become dually involved. In a sample of 213 crossover youth in Los Angeles County, living in out-of-home placements, African-American adolescent males were found to have a higher incidence of re-arrest and increased occurrence of moves from foster family homes to congregate settings (Huang, Ryan, Sappleton, & Chiu, 2015). In a prospective study of over 5000 Minnesota 3rd grade students with maltreatment histories, African-American male crossover youth, between the ages of 9 and 14 years old, were among the most likely minority group to be detained for delinquent behavior (Cho, Haight, Choi, Hong, & Piescher, 2019). Finally, Herz and Dierkhising (2018) compiled data on 15,000 dually involved youth from three large metropolitan cities, finding that African-American males were more likely to become dually involved.

## Challenges Facing Dual-Status Youth

Dual-status youth face unique challenges because of their compounding involvement in two systems. Compared to single-system involved youth, for example, dual-status youth have fewer court dismissals, are less likely to receive home-based probation over congregate care placements, and have increased rates of recidivism (Baglivio et al., 2016; Halemba et al., 2004; Herz & Ryan, 2008a, b; Herz et al., 2010). Using linked child welfare and juvenile justice records in California, foster youth subsequently entering the juvenile justice system receive harsher sanctions, and fewer probation sentences, even as first-time offenders (Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, & Marshall, 2007). Another challenge of dual-status youth is their increased mental and emotional health issues, and persistent gaps in service provision to address their needs, explained by a lack of coordination between juvenile justice and child welfare professionals (Abbott & Barnett, 2015).

System-involved youth, whether only in foster care or juvenile justice, are already at an increased risk of poor

academic outcomes (O'Higgins, Sebba, & Gardner, 2017; Piescher, Colburn, LaLiberte, & Hong, 2014; Siennick & Staff, 2008; Stone & Zibulsky, 2015). These adverse outcomes are even more pronounced for dually involved youth (Hirsch et al., 2018). Traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect, out-of-home placement in foster care and juvenile justice, and frequent placement moves, are root causes of gaps in academic achievement, and grade failure (Piescher et al., 2014). Frequent placement moves and congregate settings present additional challenges for dual-status youth, undermining their development, heightening their traumatic experiences, and reducing their odds of successful transition into adulthood (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Ryan & Testa, 2005; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). As dually-involved youth are between 10 and 17 years old, they are more likely to be placed in congregate foster care settings, even if their juvenile justice sentence is probation. Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000) found that multiple foster placement moves increase delinquency and juvenile justice recidivism. Congregate settings such as emergency shelters, detention centers, group homes, residential treatment facilities, and psychiatric hospitals, are the most restrictive placements for youth and are breeding ground for maladaptive behaviors, increasing the risk for initial and persistent delinquency (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Ryan, Marshall, Herz, & Hernandez, 2008). Collectively, the challenges faced by dually involved youth are driving practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers to take notice of how to effectively address the dual-status problem.

## Lived Experiences Research

Extant qualitative work on foster youth, justice-involved youth, and dual-status youth is limited, but provides rich context on experiences of system-involved adolescents. A review of existing lived-experiences literature supports the current study in adding to the existing body of knowledge on youth perceptions on their juvenile justice, foster care or dual-status experiences. Among the limited qualitative studies addressing the dual-status problem, few have engaged foster youth or justice-involved youth as participants, but have engaged professionals working with this population. Research works highlighting professional perceptions have sought to explore how professionals can enhance implementation of crossover youth services through multi-system collaboration (Huang & Rhoden, 2017). Using ethnography, and focus groups, qualitative work on the dual-status problem has provided rich insight into those working with this youth population. Abrams, Shannon, and Sanalang (2008) conducted a mixed methods analysis, which included ethnographic interviews, to explore perceptions of services for dual-status youth at a transitional living program finding

professionals and youth believed in the benefits. Another study using ethnographic inquiry engaged child welfare and juvenile justice professionals to explore their perceptions of multi-system collaboration (Haight et al., 2014). Findings suggested multi-system change implementation varies across jurisdictions as professionals seek ways to re-identify roles and responsibilities of services. Additional qualitative studies include professional perceptions of race disparities among dual-status youth (Marshall & Haight, 2014); and examination of the unique needs of crossover youth (Walsh & Jagers, 2017).

Qualitative studies exploring experiences of system-involved youth include work in understanding youth experiences in foster care (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Geenen & Powers, 2007). Prevailing themes among this literature have been foster care experiences related to: (1) placement moves, (2) placement type, (3) loss of normalcy, and (4) issues related to foster care stigma. For example, foster youth report frequent placement moves, and placement in congregate settings influence adverse adolescent identity development (Kools, 1997). Interviews with 22 former foster youth in the Midwest, having a range of 3–20 placements, revealed participants expressing a loss of normalcy, loss of family connections, and strong feelings of uncertainty associated with not knowing when or why they were being moved to various placements (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008).

Deep understanding into the broad experiences of dual-status youth limited in the present literature is limited. A recent study queried 24 dual-status females residing in a detention facility, finding the young ladies expressing experiences of spending more time held in placement, and negative treatment in the residence because of their dual-involvement (Flores, Hawes, Westbrook, & Henderson, 2018). As more is learned about the dual-status phenomenon, there is a need to amplify the voices of these youth in the literature.

## The Current Study

The current study builds on existing qualitative research exploring challenges and barriers present for youth involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. In this study, the lived experiences of dual-status youth, and their perceptions of unique challenges are highlighted. What do dual-status youth believe are causes of dual-involvement? What are the systemic and/or individual factors leading youth to crossover from one system to another? How are dual-status trajectories explained? Despite emerging qualitative study exploring experiences of youth and former dually-involved youth, less is known about how dual-status youth broadly explain their experiences in both systems and how they

perceive their dual involvement to present added challenges. In this study, former dual-status youth were interviewed to uncover their journey in two systems through their lens, through addressing the following research questions:

1. How do dually involved youth make sense of their experiences in the juvenile justice and foster care systems?
2. What do dually involved youth consider to be their unique challenges of being in the juvenile justice and foster care systems?

## Method

### Research Design

This study reports analysis and findings from the author's previous qualitative doctoral dissertation research, and is a subset of the original data compiled. The dissertation study was based in Texas. The author obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Prairie View A&M University prior to commencement of the study, and data collection.

This study used a phenomenological design in data collection, to explore the lived experiences of former youth involved in the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Use of the phenomenological approach seeks to gain understanding and knowledge rooted in everyday experiences (Byrne, 2001). Current literature is limited in describing how this unique population makes sense of their dual-involvement experiences. The dual-status youth voice was at the core of this investigation, as their lived experiences of involvement in foster care and juvenile justice shed light on this phenomenon. Use of the phenomenological design helped in identifying emerging themes and authenticating findings across participants (Hays & Wood, 2011). Thus, the decision to employ a phenomenological design allowed the researcher to explore the participants' unique experiences through their lens.

### Participant Recruitment

For the study, the investigator sought to achieve a sample of participants who would represent the dual-status or crossover youth population, based on their past experiences in the foster care and juvenile justice systems (Creswell, 2013). Originally conducted for a dissertation research study, over the course of 5 months, prospective participants were recruited in Houston Texas, and the surrounding area. The investigator required that prospective subjects be at least 18 years old, and have previous involvement in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Prior dual-involvement

could be concurrent or non-concurrent. Individuals with previous involvement in only one system (child welfare or juvenile justice), were not eligible. Recruitment consisted of emailing agencies, organizations, and programs known to work with individuals, formerly involved in the juvenile justice and/or foster care system. This included representatives of public academic institutions providing assistance to former foster youth, public agency representatives in the child welfare and juvenile justice system in Houston, Texas, and shelters housing residents with former foster care or juvenile justice involvement. Additionally, through the researcher's professional experience and knowledge within the two systems, there were professionals, who assisted in identifying persons who fit the recruitment criterion. As participants engaged the researcher with interest, referrals of additional participants through snowball sampling, took place (Durdella, 2017). After saturated efforts were made to recruit, a total of 11 subjects volunteered to participate in the study. One volunteer was eliminated after the preliminary screening, as the volunteer solely had involvement with one system, thus, not meeting the criteria. The remaining ten individuals who responded and volunteered resulted in an unintentional homogenous group of African-American and Hispanic participants. Notably, the result of the participants is representative of trends reported in the dual-status youth literature of an overrepresentation of minority youth (Herz & Dierkhising, 2018). Demographic information (age, gender, race/ethnicity, and educational level, and employment) for participants is included in Table 1. Pseudonyms chosen by the researcher were used in relaying participant demographics. The current study included 10 former dual-status youth, between the 18 and 24, four males and six females,

ranging in age from 18 to 24. Of the ten dual-status participants, employment trends showed a direct split, where five reported being employed either part-time or full-time, and the remaining five were unemployed. Only one of the participants had a post-secondary education degree, five of the ten had their high school diploma as their highest educational level, three completed the 11th grade, and one participant completed the 9th grade.

### Procedure

The researcher engaged in face-to-face, semi-structured, individual interviews with participants. The interview protocol for participants consisted of ten questions designed to establish an open dialogue about experiences in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. The questions in the interview protocol were developed based on the research addressing the experiences and perceptions of foster care youth and dual-status youth (Huang et al., 2015; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010; Unrau et al., 2008). Participants engaged in open-ended discussion, allowing them to speak freely of their lived experiences. Questions such as: (a) Tell me about your experience in the juvenile justice and foster care system? (probes: What was the reason you become involved in the juvenile justice system? How old were you when you entered foster care? and (b) Tell me about how being a dual-status youth has impacted your life today? were posed to subjects.

Interviews were audio-taped, and conducted at various sites of the participants' choice, including restaurants, coffee shops, and offices. Interviews with dual-status participants lasted between 30 and 120 min, depending on the amount of information participants wanted to share. Interviews were conducted at settings selected and agreed upon by the participants and the researcher, including professional offices, restaurants and coffee shops. Privacy and comfort for the participant was ensured. Participants were provided with a \$25 gift card as compensation, given to them at the end of the interview.

### Data Analysis

The process of analysis was ongoing, meaning that observations, notetaking, and reflexive memoing took place throughout data collection (Swanson & Holton, 2005). As interview data were collected, and transcribed, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the accumulated data, conducting a line-by-line analysis to draw out rich segments of the data. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher following each interview, and reviewed for accuracy. Following, transcribed interviews were entered in

**Table 1** Dual-status participant demographic data with pseudonyms

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Education	Employment
Franklin	18	Male	African-American	High School	Unemployed
Marcie	24	Female	African-American	Associate's	Employed
Linus	23	Male	African-American	High School	Unemployed
Lucy	21	Female	African-American	11th grade	Employed
Sally	20	Female	African-American	High School	Unemployed
Schroeder	18	Male	Latino	High School	Employed
Freda	24	Female	African-American	11th grade	Unemployed
Charlie	18	Male	Latino	9th grade	Employed
Patty	22	Female	African-American	High School	Employed
Dora	18	Female	Latina	11th grade	Unemployed

the qualitative data management program, Atlas.ti to arrange data into value codes. After an exhaustive review and coding of the data, three major themes emerged and are in the results.

### Authenticity, Dependability and Transferability

Thorough qualitative research seeks to produce findings that are *trustworthy*. Swanson and Holton (2005) suggested that to enhance trustworthiness, the study process should meet standards of authenticity (also called credibility), dependability (or consistency), and transferability. To ensure optimal congruency in the research findings (Shenton, 2004), this study adopted research methods used in similar qualitative works with the dual-status population. Having over 20 years of practice experience in the child welfare system, including working with dually-involved youth, the researcher is versed in the participant culture (Shenton, 2004). The researcher reviewed literature on perceptions of foster youth, justice-involved youth, and dual-status youth and developed instruments based on prior studies. Dependability is marked by the qualitative “researcher-as-instrument” through: (1) the researcher having familiarity with the phenomenon and setting of the study; (2) the researcher having strong conceptual interests in the study; (3) taking a multidisciplinary approach in lieu of focusing on a single discipline; and (4) having good investigative skills which can draw participants out in questioning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therein, the researcher has detailed her professional experience and strong familiarity with the topic dually-involved youth, having professional experience in both systems. The researcher has also participated in a local dual-status youth initiative in Harris County, Texas, allowing her to draw information from multidisciplinary professionals (legal, education, social services, juvenile justice, etc.). Thus, the study will be dependable and the design repeatable.

Transferability provides for research findings to be applicable in other contexts and with other similar populations. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggests that achieving a good level of transferability in qualitative work includes whether participant characteristics are comparable with other samples, and a diversity in sampling allowing for broader applicability. In the current study a low level of transferability was reached, the resulting sample of subjects was homogeneous.

## Results

Interviews with study participants illuminated how they understood their experiences of foster care and juvenile justice involvement, and how these experiences shaped their

**Table 2** Dual-status participants in congregate settings

Participant	Residential treatment	Shelter	Group home	Hospital	Juvenile detention center
Franklin	X		X	X	
Marcie					
Linus	X		X		
Lucy	X				X
Sally	X	X		X	
Schroeder	X	X			
Freda	X		X	X	
Charlie	X	X			
Patty	X				X
Dora	X		X		X

**Table 3** Dual-status participant pathways

Participant	Foster care to juvenile justice	Juvenile justice to foster care	Crossover youth
Franklin		X	
Marcie	X		
Linus	X		
Lucy			X
Sally			X
Schroeder		X	
Freda	X		
Charlie		X	
Patty	X		
Dora	X		

lives. Before describing thematic findings learned from conversations with participants, some overall observations give context trends within the sample. Each of the participants reported having had at least two out-of-home placements, with all but one participant having been in a congregate setting (psychiatric hospital, detention, residential treatment, or group home). This finding is consistent with other crossover youth studies regarding placement stability and placement type. A description of the participants’ congregate setting types is in Table 2.

Another general observation was the pathways by which participants in this study became dually-involved. Interestingly, pathways did determine distinctions in how participants viewed their lived experiences. Six of the ten participants reported entering the foster care system first, and then becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Two participants reported being involved in the juvenile system, and subsequently entering the foster care system. Finally, two remaining participants reported crossover experiences,

wherein, they had experiences in both systems, but not ever concurrently (Table 3).

A thorough analysis of the interview data, brought fourth three key themes. First, *experiences of or leading to dual involvement* illustrates how participants described the lived experiences of dual involvement, or what they believe led to their entering in the juvenile and foster care systems. Second, environmental and systemic traumatic experiences, illustrated participants' exposure to multiple traumas arising from pre- and post- system involvement. Multiple, and varied traumas prior to juvenile or foster care involvement, led to a trajectory of difficulties for former youth who entered first as juveniles, or who were crossover. Third, participants, except for members of the crossover group, detailed having an absence of normalcy opportunities (dating, obtaining employment, participation in sports, etc.), as a dual-status youth, in their foster care placements.

### Experiences of or Leading to Dual-Involvement

This theme illustrates how participants described the lived experiences of dual involvement, or what they believe led to their entering in the juvenile and foster care systems. When looking at pathways to dual-involvement, participants' experiences in each category shared similarities. Across each of the pathways, nine of the ten total participants shared in their having at least one experience in a congregate placement, while in foster care (Table 3). For participants, placement in congregate settings underscored difficulties they personally experienced or observed.

Five participants in the study reported they entered the foster care system first, and later became involved in the juvenile justice system. These individuals ultimately became concurrently involved in both systems. Common among this group was a realization that their dual-status involvement was brought about by circumstances occurring once they entered foster care, which they feel would not have occurred otherwise. Marcie, a 24-year old African-American female, originally entered the foster care system at the age of three years old, following a failed relative adoption. Later adopted by another relative at 6 years old, she re-entered foster care at 14. Marcie reported experiencing placements in foster homes, emergency shelters, residential treatment facilities, and while involved in juvenile, she spent time in a detention center. Marcie share this:

I had two foster homes. One of them was good. There were two older sons, and I was babied. After my grandma died, I went to CPS in shelter, and then when to a foster home that was horrible! I started acting out because I wasn't getting fed, nothing but oatmeal, and

a lot of noodles, and they put me on medications. The foster mother had me shoplifting, and stealing, but I got in trouble with juvenile for fighting and running away from that place.

In tandem to Marcie's story, Freda, a 24-year old African-American female entered foster care as an infant. After two failed adoptions, she re-entered foster care at the age of 11, and remained in foster care until 18 years old. During this time, Freda reported being in over 20 placements, all of which were in congregate settings, including residential treatment facilities, emergency shelters, and psychiatric hospitals across the state of Texas. She believes foster parents and staff at facilities are not watched closely, leaving the possibility of victimization of children and youth "behind the scenes". Thus, Freda shared being "mad at the world" and that anger continued throughout her time in care. Freda shared the following:

Some of them [placements] were good, you know. Some of them weren't too good either. I got my foot broke at one by a staff member. They were restraining me and I was telling them, you broke my foot, ya'll broke my foot. And they just continued to restrain me. I ran away from most of them [placements]. I was going anywhere. It didn't matter. I had problem with authority. Somebody telling me what to do. Staff do sneaky things or treat you certain types of way, and nobody really cares because ya'll the bad kids. They can hit you. There's no cameras in the room, and there's only cameras in the hallways. They can do something. They can assault you.

Linus is a 23-year-old African-American/Native American male, who entered foster care at the age of 16 years old. While in foster care, Linus reported residing in more than five placements in 2 years, all but one being a congregate setting. He reported having difficult experiences in his one foster home placement, and with congregate care staff who he believed bullied him because of his identification as an LGBTQ individual. Linus' entry into the juvenile justice system, he reported, occurred while in a congregate setting, when he was arrested for destroying property. Linus shared the following:

I just felt like I was on my own, you know. And nobody believed me when I said I was being treated differently. So, I would go to jail for doing bad things. The places I was at were horrible. They didn't have no type of structure. They had structure, but they didn't have no organization. They were not organized at all. And they discriminated. Like I'm in the LGBTQ community, you know what I'm saying so I just really feel that they didn't really do much for us and there were like discriminating. It was a horrible thing when I was in

foster care. I just felt like I was on my own, you know. So, I would always go to jail for doing bad things to people.

Patty is a 22-year-old African-American female, who entered the foster care system at the age of 6 years old and remained until the age of 18. Patty's entered the juvenile justice system at the age of 16, while in foster care, for a felony robbery offense. She had a total of six out-of-home placements, including foster homes, and shelters. Patty said she met a boy in one of her placements who got her involved in "crazy stuff", and they ended up getting arrested. In describing her foster care and juvenile justice experiences, Patty said she was in a detention center for a few months, and then returned to a foster home, where she reported feeling accepted and supported. Patty shared some of her experiences while in foster care saying:

For the first part, it was horrific because I was so young. You know, it's like, where is my parents: I didn't act out in school, or anything, you know. They had placed me and my brother in the same place, so I had to be strong for him. Then later on, I started to adjust to it and my brother, he's the one who would act out. And I was the one that was good, so it was like I can't act out and he's acting out. I gotta be good for one of us. We did get separated.[In foster home] They did treat us well. We didn't get treated badly.[In detention center] Some of them is like, you know how they have their favorites. And if you that person that stays out the way, there are some that try to test you. There's others; you can go to them and get everything you need. Yea, it's just a lot of different personalities. The worst thing about all of it was being away from my family and just being there, it taught me good and the bad life.

Patty's seemingly positive experience in a foster home highlights the importance of youth having supportive caregivers that can influence them as they enter adulthood. Her main concern for being a dual-status youth was having to move often, and having to change schools. Saying "everything, it just changes a lot", spoke to her frustration with an inability to maintain consistency.

Dora is a 19-year-old Hispanic female. Dora's foster care journey started at the age of seven and ended when she turned 18, when she chose to leave the foster care system and be on her own. Dora believes that being in foster care and her feelings about those experiences is what led her to become a juvenile offender. She experienced frequent placement moves in foster care, at least one juvenile detention placement, persistent school moves, and separation from her older sister. Dora shares this regarding her lived experience and how she became dually-involved:

I've been in foster care since I was seven. I've been in some with my sister. And like used to fight all the time. Because like when I was in a group home the girls were older and they tried to act like they could boss everyone around and be mean to them; and then one time one of the girls pushed my sister. And then we started fighting. I started fighting when I was 13, and I just kept on fighting. I think it was because I was in the system, and I had to learn now to defend myself and my sister.[Foster parents] You can tell they're in it for the money. Like they treat their [biological] kids better than foster kids. Like I used to have a foster home, she used to do coupons. Furthermore, she would make us eat soup most of the time.[juvenile justice system] was teaching you how to respect and learn your manners. The staff was actually nice and sometimes more understanding.

There were three male study participants who became dually-involved through entry into the juvenile system, and later entering the foster care system. What these participants shared was accountability for behaviors which brought them into the juvenile system, and two expressed beliefs that entering both systems helped them to mature. Summaries of their experiences are detailed below.

Franklin is an 18-year-old African-American male. His dual-status pathway started in the juvenile justice system and he became involved with CPS when his father refused to accept responsibility for him. Franklin was placed only in congregate settings as a dual-status youth. Franklin saw benefits and challenges in his involvement in both systems. Franklin shared the following on challenges of being dually involved:

Not knowing what's going on with one case or the other because I have to look for two different things and try to figure out which is which. Furthermore, it's all the labels. Insults are one thing, but it's the labels of like foster kid, or juvenile status. Being in both makes it even harder. One little slip-up and I end up back in trouble. In foster care, there are good sides and bad sides. There are times when CPS moves extremely slow in a case. When county and CPS kids are in the same place, it is always the CPS kids who get blamed for everything. The adults point at us but with county kids, you don't see any ever see any repercussions for those kids. The psych hospital actually wasn't one of the worst, it was actually one of the best because of the fact that I had been there so many times over the years, they knew who I was. But the juvenile system will treat, staff talk down on the residents.

Franklin still reported being fortunate for being involved with CPS for all the educational benefits (free college



tuition), benefits of having an attorney to represent him in CPS and juvenile cases, and good medical benefits. He considered his attorney to be his strongest advocate, and indicated that juvenile justice-only youth, often do not have the resources to have a good attorney to speak up for them.

Schroeder is an 18-year-old Hispanic/Latino male, whose dual-status journey started in the juvenile system. Coming from an impoverished and abusive family environment with his grandparents, he reported that he started running away at the age of 11 years old, and engaged in acts of truancy. He said he had frequent juvenile delinquency encounters from the age of 11 to 15, when he dropped out of school, and ran away from his grandparents for the last time. While homeless, Schroeder was caught stealing food in Wal-Mart, and was placed in juvenile detention. Once he was being released, his grandparents, mother nor father, would accept him in, so he ended up in foster care. From 15 to 18, Schroeder was in five congregate placements, as no foster parent homes would accept him. He reported having seen a lot of incidents in his placements, but he never got into any trouble. Some of Schroeder's thoughts on experiences in his placements were:

Good thing was, I was just happy to have three hots and a cot. Bad thing was, they didn't feed us enough, I mean I had a lost 80 pounds in five months. And I wasn't really big so they got really concerned and they tried to put me on multi vitamins and stuff like that. I mean most of them [placements] I think all of them were like all males. I think the only time there was like female interaction was like at the shelter, I was placed in RTC's throughout the whole time and I kept switching caseworkers and so, at one point I had a caseworker for like three days, switched again. But I never really went to adults or anything for help just because I like I didn't feel like opening up like because most of the interaction was just with other males and so I mean there was really no issues. If there was a fight people would be cool the next day. Just hash it out. But I didn't really have too many problems there. I was always good.

Grateful for the refuge of the foster care system, Schroeder said shared that if not for being in the CPS system, he would not have learned a lot of things, and he may have continued an immature mentality. Schroeder suggested that dual-status youth should not be integrated in placements with juvenile-only youth. He added the following:

Yea; Like there would be county kids from JJ and CPS kids in the same dorms or the same RTC's and it would start trouble because some of the kids from CPS ain't never seen no hard life. So, they come in there and see all these hard people coming straight out of jail,

coming straight out of juyv: I mean it kinda messes them up. I've seen a lot of kids get bullied and beat up because of that. So yea, I would say don't integrate it as much because it's a little too comfortable; I mean most of the staff there, I know they're there for a paycheck. They're just there and most of the time they don't really care. So, I would just say don't integrate; not all the staff care and not all the CPS kids deserve that.

Charlie is an 18-year-old Hispanic male, whose dual-status journey began with felony arson charge as a juvenile. While in a juvenile detention facility, he learned that CPS became involved because of his mother's drug problems, so he was unable to return home. Charlie was in the foster care system for 2 years, and resided in four congregate settings. Charlie reported that his family had previous CPS history, when he was 10 years old, but he was not removed from his family. In comparing his foster care and juvenile experiences, he said it was easier being involved in juvenile justice. He felt the judge over his juvenile case was willing to listen to him and that his probation officer was interested in helping him. Additionally, he was assigned a supportive attorney. Charlie shared the following regarding his experiences:

My first month of me being at...my very first shelter, it was very emotional. I went weeks where I didn't get to see my parents. They hadn't come up with the visitation plan, you know, it had just begun. And there would be these times where I would break down to myself. What happened? What's going to happen? You know I was always thinking of what's to come. And I wasn't really enjoying myself. You know they had all of these different activities, especially considering it was during the summer, well not during the summer. Summer was like two months after, but I wasn't really enjoying myself, or what they were doing. I mean, the staff and the other kids they were nice to meet....they were very nice people. I had no reason to be upset with JJ, because I know what I did and didn't question. With CPS, the treatment I received was ok. They did show favoritism at times. Some kids had clothes stolen. I had two jackets, a speaker, and a game boy stolen. I often kept to myself and kept my things to myself. When I was kind and shared things, this got taken for granted and my stuff would get taken.

Two participants, Lucy and Sally, reported having non-concurrent crossover experiences. Both ladies reported early histories of CPS involvement, later found themselves involved in the juvenile justice system, long after exiting foster care. Lucy is a 21-year-old African-American female, who entered foster care before she was 3 years old, and entered again by the age of 12 years old. Each of her

stays in foster care was < 1 year, with the second time, being approximately 5 months. She reported coming from impoverished backgrounds, and her mother was regularly involved in criminal activity. She entered the juvenile system at the age of 14 years old, after she had already exited the foster care system. Her delinquency charges included “episodes” of assault at school, stealing food, and having sex with juveniles in the detention center. Lucy described her foster care and juvenile justice experiences as follows:

In detention, I was supposed to do six months, but I ended up doing three because they sent me there and then they sent me to the psych ward to get evaluated. And then after that, they realized it was the fact that I wasn't on medication so they only gave me three (months). I was in a foster home, and I wasn't eating. I finally said something to a lady at church, and then I started getting fed. So then, when we would go to get clothes, I was not given the same amount of clothes as other kids. I did not have new shoes. They [foster parents] don't care. Their jobs, how I feel, is to take your child from you. I think if you got a foster home, cameras should be posted up everywhere. If you have a foster home, there should be a certain limit of kids that can be there. And if you got a foster home it should be an age group, because kids beat up kids. Kids rape kids.

Sally Brown is a 20-year-old African-American female, who spent time in the foster care system outside of the state of Texas, from the age of about 3 to 4 years old. She re-entered foster care for another brief stay at the age of about five and then went to live with a relative. Sally entered the juvenile system, years after her foster care experience as an adolescent. She said her charges have included battery, disturbing the peace, and “a lot of fights”. Sally described her foster care experience as “horrible”. More specifically, Sally said this about her previous foster mother:

She treated me and my brother like we were just people on the street, cuz we not kin to them. But I mean the state trust you with the kids. Like you not supposed to treat us like that. Like she had a dog, and I know this one time she had told us to go in the backyard and she had this pit bull and like the pit bull was chasing us and like we was like crying trying to get in the house and stuff like that, she would not let us get in the house. She had a child at the time around our age. We couldn't play with the child. It was just crazy like, we had to stay in the room; if not, we had to go outside with the dog and get chased, almost all day, every day.

Sally described her experience in a juvenile detention facility differently:

Detention center? I'm not going to lie, it's like a playground! I mean, basically it's like you sit around and do what you want to do, but if it was school time you would be going to school, and stuff like that. School was fun. They give you like the answers; you pass; you go to church, you eat, you don't eat, you stay in the cell. I mean, it's like a playground.

## Environmental and Systemic Traumatic Experiences

Childhood and adolescent traumatic experiences are known to negatively influence a decreased self-esteem, poor coping skills, and undermine the ability to build and sustain healthy attachments (Fratto, 2016). For dual-status youth, who have an increased likelihood of adverse outcomes, ongoing complex trauma experiences can undermine healthy attachments to peers, caregivers, and supportive staff. Common among each of the participants in this study, regardless of their pathway, was the presence of persistent complex trauma. Sources of these experiences were environmental and systemic. Environmental traumatic experiences are considered those brought on by family or community events, not related to system involvement. Systemic traumatic experiences are described as those events occurring, and often repeating, while the youth was involved in foster care and/or juvenile justice.

Environmental traumas of family abuse and neglect from participants included a range of frequency and severity. Types of abuse included being intentionally burned, sexually abused, exposure to drugs at birth, family violence, and severe physical punishment and abuse. Participants also reported generational traumas where they reported having family members who regularly engaged in criminal activity, had their own abuse histories as victims, and perpetrators, and severe poverty. Former dually-involved individuals in this study shared their histories of significant environmental traumatic events occurring prior to, between, and after system involvement. Prior to her entry into foster care or juvenile justice, Marcie reported coming into care at the age of three years old, when her father burned her with fire. Schroeder described family violence, and severe physical abuse by his grandparents, saying “I have the marks to prove it.” It was these experiences that lead him to run away from his grandparents' home on several occasions, until he left and did not return. Freda, a single mother, of a young child, reported that in addition to an entire childhood in the foster care system, and all her adolescence with involvement in the juvenile justice system, she exited the system experiencing added trauma including brief homelessness, and the death of an infant child to SIDS. Prior to her system involvement, Sally experienced losing a brother to suicide, and residing

in impoverished communities with family. Sally, also a single mother of an infant, was residing in a homeless shelter at the time of the interview. While involved in the system, Sally further shared that her grandmother was in prison for child abuse of an unrelated child, that resulted in death. The grandmother was ultimately given the death penalty. Lastly, Lucy described a childhood background where her mother as a convicted felon, she also experienced severe physical abuse and neglect from her family, and reported having been raped as a pre-teen by a female babysitter.

Participants described experiences of systemic traumas occurring while involved and placed in the juvenile or foster care systems. These occurrences ranged from multiple placements, separating them from friends, and family, treatment in foster homes and congregate settings, and abject neglect in placements. In addition to experiencing over 20 placements during her time in foster care, Freda reported having two failed adoptions. In her first foster home, she was sexually abused by her adoptive father. She carried that trauma into her second foster home, who was a single mother that Freda loved, saying "that's still my mama". However, Freda said her sexual acting out, became too pronounced for her adoptive mother to manage. Additionally, five of the ten participants (Lucy, Sally, Schroeder, Charlie, and Dora), all shared stories of not being regularly fed, or given minimal meals compared to biological children. One of the female participants expressed not being given size and weather appropriate clothing, and she did not have new clothing while in her placement.

Taken as a whole, former dual-status youth articulated traumatic experiences which influenced their lives, leaving them hesitant to form trusting relationships in adulthood, particularly when these traumatic experiences were left unaddressed and untreated. The foster care and juvenile justice system are supposed to serve as safe havens for children and youth. Quotes from these participants bring to light a need to ensure that accountability measures within systems are being consistently enforced.

## Absence of Normalcy

Federal legislation mandates states to ensure youth in foster care have opportunities for "normalcy" in their placements (2017). Dual-status youth from two of the categories of pathways shared an absence of normalcy opportunities in experiences in foster care or juvenile detention settings. Crossover youth participants experienced less than a year in foster care, and did not remark on presence or absence of normalcy experiences. Children and adolescents develop social skills and learn independence and responsibility from engaging in age and developmentally appropriate activities, serving as teaching moments. Participant interviews told the

story of a range of missed opportunities for these individuals, and barriers to simple activities such as going to the movies, playing organized sports in school, or dating. For example, Marcie reported that she was not taught how to manage money, how to drive, "use tampons", and she did not have anyone to talk to about birth control. Schroeder further commented that he missed out on key adolescent milestones and activities while in foster care:

Sports, never allowed sports. There's limited rec time. Lots of the placements that we went to you had to wear jumpers, and I didn't understand that because I was CPS and I should be able to wear my own clothes. There was no extracurricular activities like football, soccer, or stuff like that. Stuff that kids would play. That's a big thing I was always complaining about. Can we not go outside, play soccer or something?

Charlie, further expressed distressing occurrences where he longed to just have an ordinary life, like other youth his age, while he was dually-involved. Charlie shared:

This is not really like living. My idea of living it was being home with my family. Being able to go places with my family. Being able to go out with my friends. We weren't allowed to do stuff like go to movies. I wanna say the last one [placement], we were able to, but to an extent and through all the paperwork you know, we had to ask people that worked there higher up. They had this system-normalcy; and so, you had to sign a paper and sign up for it at the house. And that letter would go to some other lady that was higher up than the staff. And we would have to schedule a meeting in the house. We would have to talk to her so she could put us on normalcy. But the whole process, if I wanted to go somewhere, I would have to sign a paper and write, where I'm going, who I'm going with. With CPS, the normalcy process, kids have no incidents should have freedom without having to sign a lot of papers.

In contrast, there were participants who had positive experiences in their placements, where opportunities for normalcy were present. Patty, who was in a foster home, shared that she was treated very well, and she said, "me and my brother had fun. We did everything. They treated us really good." Dora and Franklin, shared mixed experiences with normalcy in their respective placements. Dora shared: We [in foster home] would be able to do activities with the family. But it was always hard to spend the night at a friend's or go out to hang out with your friends. Franklin, having only been in congregate placements, reported:

Well the hospital [psychiatric] actually wasn't one of the worst, it was actually one of the best because of the

fact that I had been there so many times over the years, they knew who I was. They knew my intelligence, my hobbies, my habits. So, they treated me like a normal person. But the juvenile system people feel like I don't need to see my family as much because I am in CPS. It's not easy to know what it's like to be a normal kid when you've been in the system. Being in both makes it even harder. I never had an allowance. Never had a car. Don't know how to drive. You know, the basics. I don't go out to parties. I don't go out to parties and I don't really celebrate very often. I just celebrated my first birthday in about 10 years. And that's because I had someone with me to celebrate. You don't do that much on holidays. I'm never home on holidays. I don't have the option to see my family.

These accounts are representative of the overall experiences from participants regarding the challenges in navigating normal adolescent experiences while involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Their descriptions are aligned with known barriers in foster and justice-involved youth endure. These missed opportunities can undermine successful transitions into adulthood, as these youths did not feel equipped to live independently, once they exited the systems.

## Discussion

This study sought to explore how former dually-involved youth make sense of their experiences in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, and what they consider to be the unique challenges of being dual-status. These former dual-status youths shared their stories, providing a broad, yet meaningful view into circumstances which shaped their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Sharing insight on unique challenges while dually-involved helps to inform child welfare and juvenile justice professionals on needed improvements in service provision with this population. While three themes emerged from participant responses, the experiences of each was personal, unique, and reflected the extant literature on dual-status and crossover youth.

The extant literature on crossover youth suggests the common pathway of becoming dually involved occurs when youth are first involved in the child welfare system, and subsequently become involved in the juvenile justice system (Herz & Fontaine, 2013; Herz et al., 2010). In the current study half of the participants entered the foster system first, three entered the juvenile system first, and two had non-concurrent crossover experiences. The pathway by which the participants became dually-involved influenced their personal narrative, and their worldview. Participants with crossover experiences, never having been concurrently

involved in foster care and juvenile justice, presented with extensive traumatic family background, which seemed to shape their later trajectory into delinquency. Conversely, for dual-status youth starting in foster care, the combination of family and systemic trauma was the catalyst for delinquency. Additionally, those spending more years in foster care, particularly those entering as infants or toddlers, and exiting as older adolescents, shared experiences of multiple and pronounced systemic trauma, including physical and sexual abuse and neglect in foster care, repeated disconnection from family and community, and harsher treatment in placements than juvenile-only or foster care-only youth. It seemed that the two youth who entered the juvenile justice system first, found refuge within these systems from past negative and abusive family circumstances.

Participants in the current study expressed their perceptions of challenges and barriers unique to their being crossover experiences. As indicated in the literature, participants reported the difficulty in receiving needed coordinated services, feeling stigmatized, and experiencing differential treatment because of their involvement in two systems (Abbott & Barnett, 2015). The experiences of being dually involved in the study participants meant instability in various vital milestones, including education (Piescher et al., 2014), and engagement in normalcy activities (2017). Placement stability and placement type was a common trend among participants who raised concerns over compounding challenges due to be dually involved, compared to single-system involved youth, and deprivation of engaging in normal developmental activities. These findings were consistent with extant literature exploring issues with frequent foster care placement moves (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Sarri et al., 2016), and placement in congregate settings (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Ryan et al., 2008).

Despite the varied challenges of being dually-involved, these participants demonstrated moments of profound insight, resilience, and they expressed hope for their future. It is from this place that professionals working with this population can utilize a strengths-based approach when providing services, and making decisions alongside of their youth clients. Training to caregivers, foster parents and congregate care staff, need ongoing trauma-informed training that is tailored to address experiences of dually-involved youth. Finally, multi-system collaboration is proving as effective in addressing the unique needs of dual-status and crossover youth. Benefits include streamlining of services, extended support, and an enhanced understanding of roles and responsibilities among child welfare and juvenile justice professionals. A need to share information across systems continues, so dual-status trends are tracked in real time. Specialized dual-status courts can be important in supporting the streamlining of services. Some jurisdictions across the country, including in Texas, are using crossover courts,

where youth juvenile and child protection courts are heard by one judge. Practices like this and others, already mentioned should be widespread, and professionals should be persistent in reducing the challenges present for this vulnerable population.

### Limitations of the Study

While the current study provides rich insight in support of previous literature on dual-status youth, it is exploratory, using a small sample, solely from participants in Houston, Texas city. Future qualitative study should include a larger sample representative from a more extensive jurisdictional range. The study participants, drawn from a convenience and snowball sampling approach, resulted only in African-American and Hispanic participants, and unable to be generalized to the broader group of dual-status youth. While there is value in exploring how youth of color understand their experiences in two systems, a more racially diverse sample would broaden the transferability of results. Another limitation is that dually-involved participants in this study were adults who had aged-out of the system, and thus, their accounts were retrospective. Over time, participants likely reframed their narratives omitting details of their experiences.

Cognizant of these limitations, future research should expand to a more significant number of youth, be more racially diverse, and include current and former dual-status youth, comparing their experiences. Further, quantitative work using longitudinal data can provide a detailed understanding of the outcomes of the dual-status population and how they fare over time.

### Conclusion

As the study on the dual-status population continues to emerge, there should be continued attention on amplifying the voices of youth involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Additionally, more qualitative work should explore the perceptions of professionals working with these youths. The findings from the current study illustrate some of the personal and emotional experiences of former dually involved individuals. In their own words, participants shared their understanding of lived experiences of being dually involved and discussed their beliefs on unique and compounding barriers endured. Continued exploration is the study of dual-status youth, particularly at every stage of their entry and processes in each system, can expand an understanding of characteristics, needs, challenges, and strengths of this population.

Ultimately, results from this study inform the need to actively involve and engage dual-status youth in their

processes. As professionals from the child welfare and juvenile justice systems continue to enhance cross communication, the hope is that outcomes for dual-status youth improve.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with ethical standards of the Prairie View A&M University Institutional Review Board and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Research Involving Human and Animal Rights** This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by the author.

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