

1-page summary: Is avoidant attachment associated with college degree completion?

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Research Questions

1. Does higher levels of avoidant attachment decrease odds of persistence for college students with foster care experience? Of graduating?
2. Are the associations between avoidant attachment and college outcomes mediated by amount of social support youth have around the time they are in college?

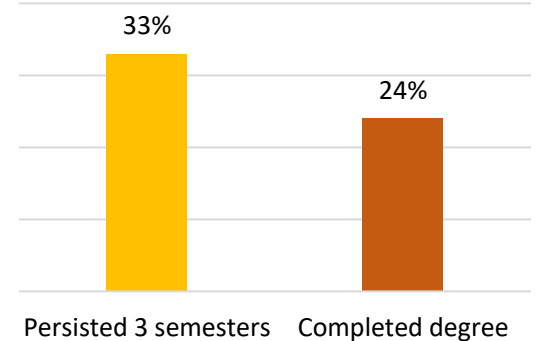
Data & Methods

Sample: Midwest Study participants who had enrolled in college (n=331 for the analysis of college persistence, n=329 for the analysis of degree completion). The Midwest Study included youth between ages of 17 and 17.5, were in foster care in IL, IA, or WI, and had been in care for at least a year before age 17. Five waves of interviews were completed between ages 17 and 25/26. We obtained data on their college outcomes from National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data in 2015, when participants were 29/30 years old.

Analytic methods: The main outcomes were whether youth persisted through their first three semesters in college (yes/no) and whether they obtained a 2-year or 4-year college degree (yes/no). The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) scale was used to measure youths' avoidant attachment at age 17 (range 1.0 to 7.0). *Avoidant attachment* is characterized by emotional guardedness, high self-reliance and unwillingness to depend on others, and minimizing one's own shortcomings. Avoidant attachment can result from past trauma and ruptured relationships. We used regression analyses to examine whether youth who were higher in avoidant attachment at age 17 were less likely to persist in college and to graduate. We used logistic regression to statistically control for a range of potential confounders.

Main Findings

- Youth who experienced more maltreatment (abuse and neglect) and who had more relationship ruptures (foster care placement changes and school changes) were higher in avoidant attachment at age 17.
- A 1-point increase in avoidant attachment decreased the odds of persistence by 26% and degree completion by 33%.
- These decreases were explained (mediated) in part by social support. Youth higher in avoidant attachment had less social support, and in turn were less likely to persist in and complete college.



Implications

- Youths' **level of avoidant attachment appears to be one of the factors influencing their chances of staying in and finishing college.**
- High avoidant attachment likely **stemmed from past experiences of relational trauma** and was perhaps an adaptive way for youth to cope with trauma and protect themselves from future injury. Youth learned to rely entirely on themselves rather than open up to relationships that may cause loss, harm, or disappointment.
- However, when youth are in college, **high avoidant attachment may close youth off from valuable relationships** that can help them with the challenging journey through college.
- Attachment styles are **durable but potentially changeable** (e.g., earned secure attachment)
- Some **ideas to address attachment issues:** treat underlying trauma, normalize help-seeking, and create opportunities for youth to develop connections to resourceful adults and peers with experience in foster care