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The protection of children and their rights: A comparison between the United States and Costa Rica

Abigail Rothweiler
arrqp4@mail.umsl.edu

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An Observational Comparison of Child Welfare Services: St. Louis, Missouri and San Jose, Costa Rica

Background

- There are over 13,000 children in Missouri's foster care system (CWLA, 2018)
- Many of these St. Louis children have experienced multiple Adverse Childhood Events (ACE) (Felitti, 1998).
- There are negative consequences that can result from exposure to traumatic stress, including poorly developed stress management systems and an increased likelihood of death at an earlier age (Chang et al, 2019)
- Research shows that preventative measures can help decrease household dysfunction and improve family social development (Freundlich 2010).
- El Patronato Nacional de Infancia (PANI) offers a wide variety of services that help prevent risky situations by providing parental support groups, assisting adolescent mothers, and empowering teenagers to take control of their lives (PANI, 2020).
- The programs in Costa Rica have proven to decrease the amount of assistance needed and improve the outcomes for children currently in the system (Soto, 2020).
- The child welfare services in St. Louis offer many positive services to struggling families but there are areas that can be improved.
- PANI, in Costa Rica, provides similar services but there are several differences.

Purpose

- To examine the current policies and programs in San Jose, Costa Rica to determine if they can be adapted for use in St. Louis, Missouri.
- By completing this literature review along with the observations between the two areas, steps can then be taken to improve the quality of life and long-term outcomes for children in the foster system in St. Louis, Missouri.

Methodology

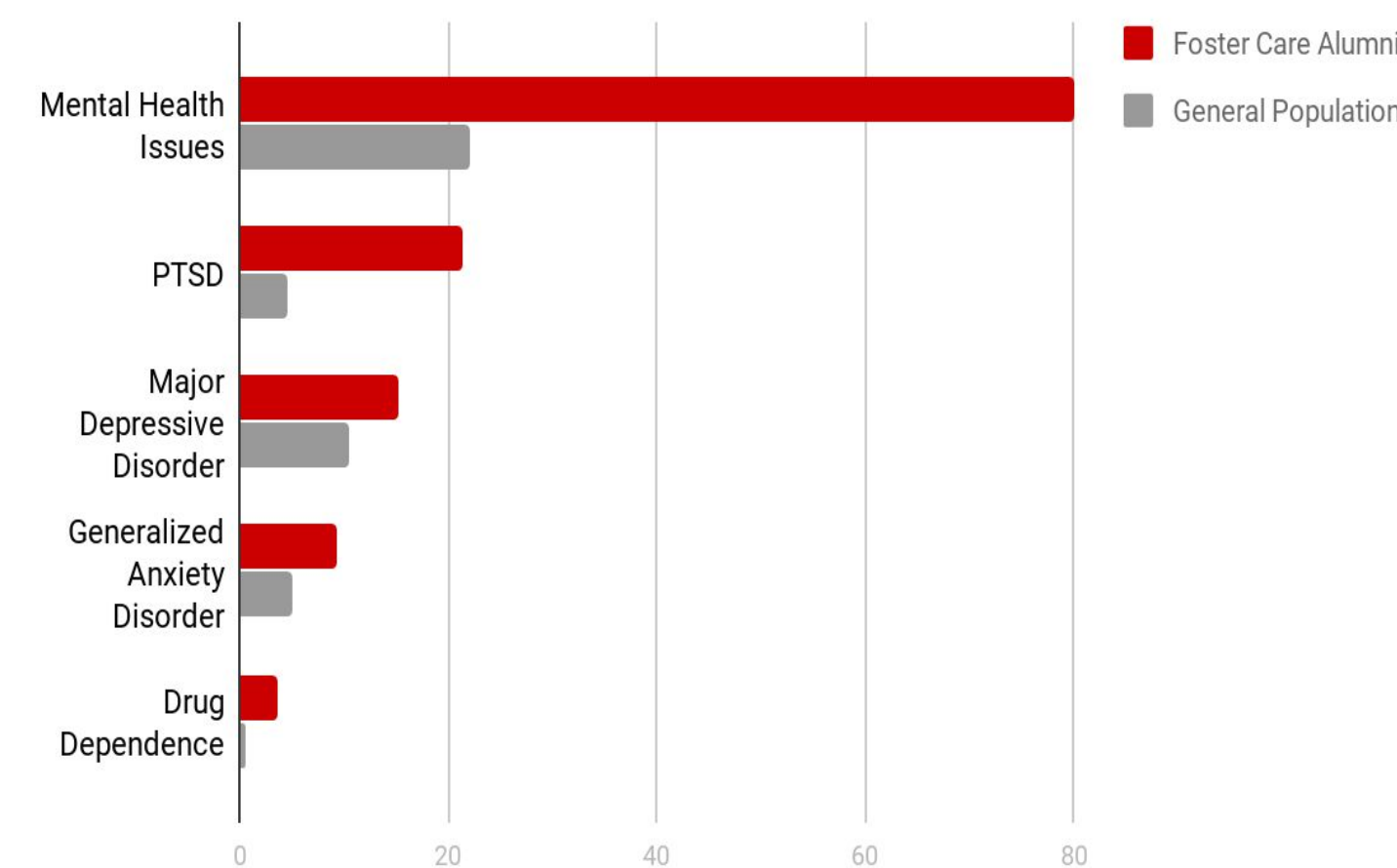
- Research was obtained by searching UMSL Summons:
 - Search words included: foster care, child abuse, pediatric traumatic stress, adoption, neglect, child development, family development, and abuse preventative measures.
- Additional information was gathered through the government child welfare websites.
- Observations were also conducted in hospitals and children group homes in San Jose, Costa Rica.



Results

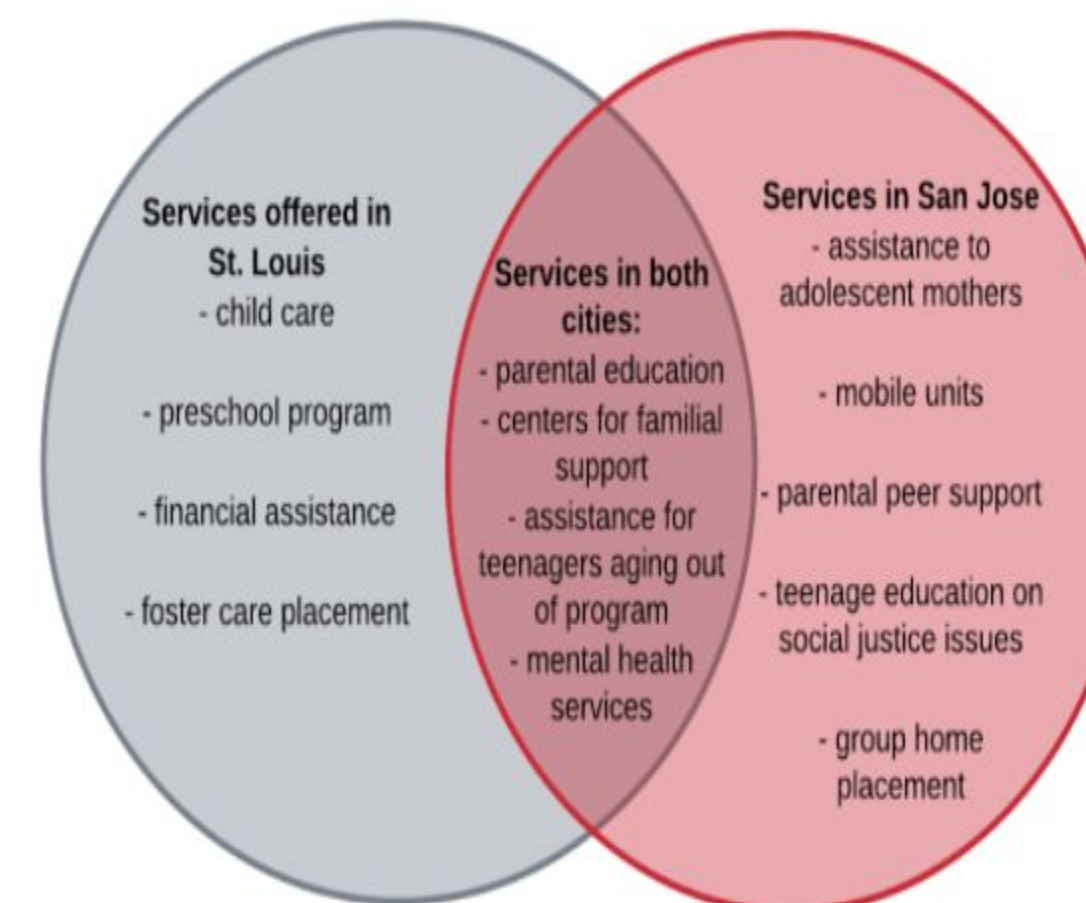


Percentage of Population with Mental Health Disorders in the United States



(McCann, 2020)

- Adults who were in the foster care system have significantly higher rates of mental health illness than the general population (McCann, 2020)
- Preventative measures decrease the amount of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) children are exposed to and the rates of mental illness (Mash & Wolfe, 2014)
- Early screening, parental education and support, financial assistance, and mental health services have been effective in decreasing the amount of children in the foster care system (Freundlich, 2020).
- Since home removal can cause toxic stress, child welfare services need to offer programs that provide parental education and family social development.
- San Jose and St. Louis offer services that help reduce familial risk factors and decrease the number of home removals.
- Children who are in the system need services that offer academic assistance, mental health services, development promotion, and self-care education (Haskins, 2017).
- Both cities offer programs that address these topics but St. Louis offers more mental health services while San Jose provides more parental and adolescent support.



(PANI 2020 and Missouri Department of Social Services, 2020)

Conclusions

- A significant amount of adults who were in the foster care system currently experience mental health issues (McCann, 2020)
- St. Louis and San Jose offer preventative services that work to decrease familial dysfunction and the number of families in need of assistance, however, St. Louis could provide further support to parents and adolescents.
- Costa Rican programs offer peer support for struggling parents, academic assistance to adolescent mothers, and support for adolescents leaving the system.
- These services decrease the amount of children entering the system and improve the quality of life for alumni.

Implications

- The Costa Rican services could be incorporated into the current services offered in St. Louis as they could potentially prevent neglectful or abusive situations from occurring and improve the long-term outcomes of fostered children.
- While it may not be possible for entirely new programs to be created, social workers should consider adding the positive aspects of the Costa Rican services into their already existing ones.
- At the very least, there needs to be more support to struggling parents and adolescents who are nearing their eighteenth birthday.

Limitations

- Further research needs to be completed to determine the long term impacts of these programs in order to ensure that they are beneficial.
- There is very little statistical information available regarding the number of cases in St. Louis and San Jose.
- The cultural and economic differences between St. Louis and San Jose need to be taken into account to determine adaptations that would need to be made.

Investigators:

- Abby Rothweiler BSN Student Nurse at the University of Missouri, St. Louis
- Shawne Manies Ph.D. Graduand, RN; Director and Asst. Teaching Professor at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, College of Nursing
- Laurie Vining, DNP Graduand, RN; Adjunct Faculty at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, College of Nursing
- Susan Yoder- Kreger, Teaching Professor of Spanish at the University of Missouri, St. Louis

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