



# Unaccompanied Immigrant Children in ORR Foster Care: Community Level Facilitators of Adjustment Identified by Service Providers

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** While many studies address immigrant integration, few focus on the adjustment process for unaccompanied immigrant children in foster care in the United States- and even fewer look at community level prevention and intervention strategies for positive youth adjustment. This study uses a human rights framework to examine community level facilitators- both prevention and interventions- that aid the adjustment for unaccompanied immigrant children in foster care as they navigate life in the US. **Method:** Seventy-nine service providers that work with unaccompanied immigrant children participated in 22 focus groups/interviews. Open coding was used to create a codebook, and then data were qualitatively analyzed using deductive and axial coding. **Results:** The major prevention strategies for community adjustment include welcoming communities and inter-agency collaborations. The major intervention strategies for systems level adjustment include community relationships, access to healthcare, and the church as an institution. **Discussion:** Implications include advocating for funding and programming to support mentors for every child, advocating for welcoming policies, and engaging unaccompanied immigrant children in research using participatory approaches.

**Keywords** Unaccompanied immigrant child · Immigrant · Macro · Systems-level · Community · Adjustment · Foster care

A wide body of research examines immigrant integration in the United States (Egmont et al., 2021; Ham et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2018). However, as noted by Cardoso and colleagues' (2019) call for research, little research focuses on the adjustment process for unaccompanied immigrant children (hereafter referred to as UC), a vulnerable group of young people arriving to the US in increasing numbers. The research available largely focuses on clinical and case outcomes for UC (Crea et al., 2018; Hasson III et al., 2020; Jani et al., 2015; Menjivar & Perreira, 2019) rather than at

the community or systems level (Cardoso et al., 2019; Caspari, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Roschelle et al., 2018). In this paper, the term 'adjustment to the US' is used when talking about unaccompanied immigrant children because our data were gathered from service providers rather than children themselves. "Adjustment" is a process where the person both adapts to the host community (e.g. language, attitudes, values) and simultaneously honors one's native heritage through cultural values, traditions, and language (Berry, 1997; Kim et al., 2013). The term adjustment commonly refers to immigrants who are navigating life in a new country, building a social network, and communicating in the host language (Hutchison, 2018; Kim et al., 2013; Özdemir & Stattin, 2014).

Social work practice uses a strengths-based approach to service delivery (Early & GlenMaye, 2000), and this manuscript focuses on the strengths and assets in communities that prevent social isolation and intervene to assist UC as they adjust to life in the US. Human rights are also a crucial component of strengths-based social work. For example, Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states, "Everyone, as a member of society, has the

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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). Given these increased vulnerabilities, social workers are well situated to promote the well-being of unaccompanied immigrant children because social work is a field built around protecting human rights (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014; Mapp et al., 2019) at both the individual and community level of intervention. This paper will specifically look at the programs, policies, institutions, systems, and collective impact initiatives within communities that help to facilitate adjustment of UC into US communities.

## Unaccompanied Immigrant Children from Central America

Most UC who arrive at the southern US border are born in one of three countries: Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador. The reasons for migration vary widely from one child and family to the next. For example, many UC leave their home country due to a lack of opportunities, widespread gang violence in the community, abuse, abandonment or neglect in the home, poverty, and natural disasters (UNHCR, 2014). However, some UC come to the US in search of greater opportunities (e.g. employment and school), or to reunite with family members who migrated previously (UNHCR, 2014).

UC are defined as children who arrive to the US without a parent or legal guardian able and willing to care for them, are under age 18 and lack legal eligibility to enter the US (Homeland Security Act of 2002 Public Law 107–296, 6 U.S.C. § 279; Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2016). Lacking a guardian, UC are placed in shelters across the US and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) serves as the legal guardian (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2019; U.S. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to socially distance in facilities, there has been a lack of housing available for UC which is disruptive and impacts the ability to provide adequate care for UC at the border.

While in the custody of ORR, most UC live in congregate care settings (commonly referred to as “shelters”) which provide food, housing, clothing, medical care, education, and basic mental health supports (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2015). Shelter caseworkers are responsible

for screening family members to determine if the child can be released to a safe and stable home (ORR, 2015). Most UC are reunited and remain undocumented in the community (Roth & Grace, 2015). However, there are times when a child is unable to identify a potential caregiver, when the caregiver is deemed inappropriate, or when the caregiver is not able to provide a safe and supportive placement.

In these cases, UC are screened for eligibility to enter the long term foster care program, are deported, or remain in care until their 18th birthday at which time they are transferred to adult detention (ORR, 2015). Eligibility criteria for the long term foster care program includes: residence in shelter care for more than four months, under 17½ years of age, and the successful legal screening for Special Immigrant Juvenile visa, an asylum claim, or a U-status visa (ORR, 2015). Similar to shelter care, UC in the long term foster care program receives basic services. However, in an effort to be a least restrictive setting, UC in long term foster care attend school in local community schools with US-born youth, and live in state licensed foster homes or group homes (which are often smaller than the ORR shelters). The long term foster care program provides counseling services, independent living skills training, and assistance with acculturation and adaptation (ORR, 2015). As with domestic foster care, many of the staff in the long term foster care programs are social workers.

## Adjustment to the United States for Unaccompanied Immigrant Children

Most existing research on wellbeing outcomes of unaccompanied immigrant children in the US focuses on outcomes at the individual level, including indicators such as mental health needs (Crea et al., 2018; Hasson III, et al., 2020), employment outcomes (Hasson III et al., 2021), placement stability (Crea et al., 2017), hope (Jani et al., 2015) and child welfare needs (Crea et al., 2018). The research also indicates that social workers have a role to advocate for access to school, relationship building, and individualized case management that addresses the culture, education, health, and mental health needs of the child (Crea et al., 2018). Becker Herbst and colleagues (2018) studied how a difficult journey led to a sense of resiliency in UC as they faced life in the US.

The literature above largely focuses on the individual factors that facilitate integration for immigrant children into their families and communities. However, research on other immigrant groups has suggested that we need to shift away from the western ideas and individualistic culture, and instead focus on structural factors and how these impact the

inequalities that immigrants in the US face (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012).

## Community and Macro Level Research Concerning Unaccompanied Immigrant Children

There is minimal research on community and systems level needs, and therefore this study meets an existing gap in the research. Evans and colleagues (2020) illustrate the need for agencies to increase their capacity to serve UC, and for social work interns to engage in policy work that will create more welcoming practices. While social workers in the US have made much headway in promoting individual integration, our roles could extend to include integration at the community and structural level through macro approaches including organizing, policy advocacy, and collaboration (Evans et al., 2020). 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.

Some of the research that focuses at the programmatic level has examined how agencies adapt over time. A study by Caspari (2020) discusses the impacts of the family separation policies on UC and the increased need for ORR to care for children. Viewing undocumented immigrants as the enemy, this policy forcibly created unaccompanied children who then had to integrate into the US without their family members. The article discusses the significant change in practices at the Department of Homeland Security and ORR and how practices adapted to the need (Caspari, 2020). Roschelle and colleagues (2018) found that social service providers had to act quickly and develop extensive networks in order to meet the needs of an influx of UC to their community. They explain how immigration policy as well as policies set by ORR greatly impacted the UC and sponsors in their community, while acknowledging the impact on service providers as well.

Cardoso and colleagues (2019) constructed a model that describes the various sources of risk and resiliency that unaccompanied immigrant children both pre and post-migration. In terms of post-migration, the ecological or macro level risks discussed that also effect UC in long term foster care include xenophobia from people in the community, a lack of comprehensive immigration and child centered policies for UC, and complicated family reunifications (Cardoso et al., 2019). Family reunification is the main goal when UC are in shelter care, but relatives have all been screened out by the time they enter long term foster care (ORR, 2015). The nuances and complexity of youth who are still pursuing, or

engaging with a new family member are extremely complex and can add to mental health, stress, case planning, and hope for the future (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, 2015). Evans and colleagues (2020) discuss a multitude of human rights violations faced by UC and the ways that social workers can act through programs and policies to meet the needs of UC here, and prevent future human rights violations.

On the other hand, Cardoso and colleagues (2019) discuss the importance of resiliency and how this can propel UC through life's challenges. The resiliency factors at the macro level that influence UC youth in the long term foster care program include pro bono legal resources, the support of community based organization, and churches (Cardoso et al., 2019). Evans and colleagues (2022) discuss how school systems have often been unprepared to assess incoming UC and meet their educational needs, yet Cardoso and colleagues (2019) mention that innovative school programming is a source of resiliency and success for UC. The long term foster care program is unique in that all UC in the program have access to legal resources so that they can work on immigration status in the US (ORR, 2015).

The purpose of the current study is to gain a deeper understanding of community level facilitators to adjustment for unaccompanied immigrant children in ORR's long term foster care program. In terms of facilitators of adjustment, the researchers looked both at prevention strategies and intervention strategies happening in local communities. This knowledge can inform practice of not only social workers, but all who work with UC in the local community. More specifically, this study examines how the host community, service providers, and community members help UC in foster care as they begin to build their lives in the US. This study is guided by the following research question: What aspects of host communities aid the adjustment process for unaccompanied immigrant children in ORR long term foster care?

## Method

### Research Design Overview

This study emerged from an ongoing partnership between a national nonprofit agency and a university researcher. The idea for the research study came from the national nonprofit Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) when they recognized the need to better understand the experiences of service providers for UC in the long term foster care program. As seen below, LIRS was engaged in the research process from the beginning to the end, which aligns with the design of a community-engaged research project (Pasick

et al., 2010). Community-engaged research is centered on reciprocal relationships between the community of interest and the researcher (Pasick et al., 2010), and has been shown to strengthen both community organizations providing services to clients and the research community (Ahmed et al., 2016).

Boston College IRB approved the protocol. The study uses a phenomenological orientation to qualitative inquiry in order to understand the shared phenomenon, behaviors and practices (Creswell, 2013) of working with UC in foster care soon after their arrival to the US.

### Focus Group Protocol

The researcher and LIRS staff created a semi-structured interview/focus group protocol to address the concerns of staff, and guided by a community-engaged research model (Pasick et al., 2010), LIRS staff provided multiple rounds of feedback before settling on the final protocol. The semi-structured focus group/interview protocols were similar across the groups of service providers, but each included a question or two that was specific to their job function (for example, the perspective of a youth care worker in a group home is different from that of the program manager). 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. All participants underwent an informed consent process prior to their participation. The researcher explained the purpose of the focus group/interview and then asked questions of the entire group, allowing multiple people to provide insight and explanation if they chose, before moving onto the next question. The researcher used live note taking during focus groups/interviews, lasting 60–90 min each. Focus groups/interviews were recorded and a research assistant listened to audio files and verified the notes taken, adding content as needed.

### Participants and Recruitment Process

LIRS helped the research team to recruit participants for this study through their long term foster care programs. Participants included foster care staff, foster parents, and community partners (e.g. legal clinic staff, teachers and school social workers, and medical personnel) who work with UC in the community. While most data were collected via focus groups, there were a few interviews due to eligibility criteria or availability of participants. Seventy-nine participants engaged in 22 focus groups/interviews, based upon their job function: (1) senior program management staff from the

long term foster care program, (2) direct care workers and case managers, (3) therapists and mental health providers, (4) foster parents, and (5) community partners as described above. The study was conducted across two cities, one in the Midwest (13 focus groups/interviews) and one in the Northeast (nine focus groups/interviews). UC did not participate in focus groups/interviews due to being dependent in family court and in the legal custody of ORR.

### Data Analytic Strategies

The first author immersed herself in the data by listening to available audio files of interviews and reading the transcripts. Three researchers reviewed and coded the six transcripts using an inductive open coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rubin & Babbie, 2017). These researchers formed a preliminary list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and finalized a codebook through a consensus-building process that involved review of the initially coded transcripts and comparison to the research question (Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Saldaña, 2015). This consensus building meeting involved a conversation around human rights violations to ensure that the codes included both prevention strategies and interventions to address human rights violations. Then, two of the five researchers/research assistants used a deductive and axial approach to code each transcript and make links among codes (Creswell, 2013).

### Methodological Integrity

The first author calculated inter-rater reliability for each transcript. The percentage of agreement was calculated: number of times coders identified the same theme per passage divided by the total number of items coded. If inter-rater reliability fell below the target of 80% (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994), the team held conversations to come to consensus about an appropriate code.

LIRS staff engaged in an external audit meeting with the first author to discuss preliminary findings (Morse, 2015). The goal of this meeting was to determine if findings were in line with observations and daily practices as well as to gain insights into causes and stories behind the findings. 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

Many of the questions used during the focus groups/interviews asked about promising practices that assist UC in

**Table 1** Community Level Facilitators that Aid Adjustment to the US for Unaccompanied Immigrant Children in ORR Long Term Foster Care Programs: Themes and Subthemes

Themes and Subthemes	
<i>Prevention Strategies</i>	
Welcoming Communities	Community as a Source of Independent Living Practice, Employment, and Extracurricular Opportunity
Inter-agency Collaboration	Partnerships to Advance Educational Opportunities Partnerships with Legal Providers
<i>Intervention Strategies</i>	
Community Relationships	Mentors Community Connections
Access to Healthcare	
Church as a Resource	

cultural and social adjustment to the US. This section first presents the main themes related to preventative practices for enhancing integration at the community level including: welcoming communities and the community as a place where multiple opportunities occur, and the use of inter-agency collaborations. Then, the authors describe the findings related to intervention strategies which include the role of community relationships, adaptations for access to healthcare, and the church as an institution. Table 1 below shows the themes and subthemes that emerged from the focus groups/interviews.

## Prevention Strategies

### Welcoming Communities

The notion of labeling communities as “welcoming” towards immigrants and refugees has become popular in the last decade (Rodriguez et al., 2018; Welcoming America, 2021). Welcoming communities is an intentional large-scale social change effort taking place in communities across the United States in an effort to achieve collective impact and community change for immigrants and refugees (improving our educational system and decreasing the achievement gap has not happened (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Welcoming America, 2021). Codes that fell under this theme included welcoming immigration policies, welcoming court procedures, community interest in learning about UC, supportive environments, observing cultural competency in others, the role of the public library, and the community as the source of practice. The number of codes and breadth of the quotes under the community as the source of practice led the researchers to create that code as a sub theme in these analyses and added the role of the library in that section as

it is an example of community engagement. Overall, 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.

Many of the quotes about welcoming communities came from foster parents as they are the ones to most often observe UC interact in the larger community. The majority of foster parents spoke to the codes: community interest in learning about UC; supportive environments for UC; and observing cultural competency in others. A welcoming community was described by one foster parent as “one that just accepts [UC] for who they are ... and offers them opportunities.” Another 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 described how enhancing community education and spreading the idea of welcoming communities was both an existing and promising practice implemented by the foster care agency that promotes well-being and integration, while working to prevent isolation. For example, a foster parent noted that UC “don’t need support but [rather] openness... It’s necessary to have open dialogue.” Another foster parent shared the experience of spreading awareness to a neighbor which is an example of the code to spread cultural competence:

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, the refugee state coordinator, and other public officials are key to spreading a culture of welcome. For example, a caseworker expressed that “some are really welcoming.” But, participants also specified the need to build cultural competency in others, and the intentional process foster care staff employ to change perceptions. For example, one legal provider described the process of how the foster care agency expanded services to a new neighborhood in which staff intentionally laid the groundwork and involved the community in the decision to ensure that UC would be adequately served in a new geographic area: “[foster care staff] 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 the intentional and preventative process they use to be welcoming towards UC in terms of their policies, practices, attitudes, and behaviors towards these young people. Welcoming communities are willing to include all people, and respectfully inquire so they can learn and grow.

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

A sub-theme to welcoming communities was the importance of the community and how it was a venue and vehicle for immigrant youth in foster care to further engage and practice their independent living skills and to gain real skills towards employment, and life after foster care. Participants discussed the role of the community as a host location for UC to explore and engage in the community and to interact with US-born persons. More specifically, they described how the community enables UC in foster care to practice the independent living skills discussed in classes and with foster care staff, and how this helps them to build confidence and become successful adults. For example, one caseworker 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 at a community partner agency 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.” 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 holding a job was yet another way to practice skills. For example, one community member explained that we are “teaching life skills at the restaurant; they are working with people they don’t know” and went on to explain the verbal skill development (e.g. learning professional language and appropriate responses in challenging settings) that takes place in the workplace. Adolescents often learn by doing, and this is seen in how UC gain practical skills and confidence as they engage in their host community through the use of public transportation, making phone calls to schedule appointments, and engaging with community members in their place of employment.

Many participants talked about how the community was able to provide job opportunities, internships, enrollment in

apprenticeship programs, and access to technical schools for UC. Foster care staff members reported that, “we’ve had several speakers about jobs, kids really open their eyes” and a program manager noted 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 businesses allows them [to see the] work-to-school connection” and a school staff member noted that the community has opportunities to “job shadow to see what the job is like.”

A caseworker explained that some of “the kids don’t have work authorization” while in the foster care program and so 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 foster care 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. Another case manager mentioned the community service program and that “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.” Participants expressed that increased funding for the agency to pay UC stipends would increase their willingness to take an internship and learn real life job skills.

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. A medical provider described how the youth stay physically fit and build social relationships : “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 school staff member described how the local library was both a source of enjoyment and a resource “students are able to get their library card here, and then access the library (computers, books) – new teen section at library has Nooks, tablets, board games.” Over and over again, it was reiterated that one of the main functions of the local community was to provide a set of resources through which UC could develop and practice skills necessary for independent living, employment, and leisure activities.

## Inter-agency Collaboration

Throughout the focus groups/interviews, participants emphasized how positive working partnerships between different service providers and agencies 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. The codes that fell under this theme include medical partnerships with doctors' offices or individual nursing staff, partnerships with community agencies, partnerships with legal providers, partnerships to advance educational opportunities and relationships with key school staff, assistance with access to employment, and multidisciplinary coordination. A foster parent described the multidisciplinary coordination and medical partnerships: “[I] definitely feel part of a multidisciplinary team – healthcare, housing, counseling, [there is] always someone I can call – caseworker, or house leader, or interns.”

The focus groups with community members such as school personnel, attorneys and lawyers, as well as nurses and local medical staff had the most to say about partnerships and inter agency collaboration, as most of them are affiliated through these ongoing partnerships. In terms of multidisciplinary coordination, a community stakeholder described how 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.” Another community partner emphasized the role of interagency work by saying, “Teamwork is a big thing, daily communications with case managers and foster parents is a must” and another went on to describe the benefit of community agencies to UC 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.” Another focus group member discussed how the 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. The other major community agency partnership noted was that of churches, which is described as a theme below under intervention strategies.

**Partnerships to advance educational opportunities.** Participants discussed a variety of partnerships with the foster care agency that were designed to help aid the educational opportunities for UC including the local schools, GED programs, job training programs, technical training

centers, and local colleges. A legal provider described that access to education was improved for some UC through the role of the “education advocates” but also expressed that UC would benefit if more schools have “special education advocates” working with UC youth. A community partner described how the local colleges were always eager and welcoming towards UC in the program who go on “college visits to understand college life.” An attorney expressed that:

Vocational counseling and sensitivity would help kids [considering] whether to run away or not. 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 but otherwise they’re in school with younger kids... so many of them just want to work, they have a lot of debt from coming here.

The role of education can influence the long term trajectory for UC youth in the US. The foster care staff and foster parents both discussed the ways in which they try to encourage youth to get a college education as it can lead to more opportunity later in life. One foster parent told the following story that shows how hard the decision between working and education can be, with pressures from both sides:

It’s something to see them finish their high school education [and] go on to college, to be able to have a good life in the United States and have their own family. [My foster child] has family back in Guatemala that’s begging him for money again. I try to tell him how many of his brothers helped him when he came here [and remind him]- you are the number one priority, complete your education, and if you have the means to help people, help the people you want to.

**Partnerships with legal providers.** A caseworker explained why legal status is critical for UC in terms of achieving a sense of permanency in the US “it’s hard to be a teenager because anything you do can affect your legal status in this country. It’s also hard to set long-term goals if you don’t know whether you’re going to be here or not.” And then went on to explain that “in some cases they can face deportation so it can be scary” and how the process is “very stressful, it causes a lot of anxiety.”

Therefore, legal partnerships are one of the most critical partnerships for the foster care program. A caseworker explained “we have a contact with University clinic attorneys, already confirmed they can take that youth’s case before they arrive in our program... we have a really strong system with them” and a senior manager explained that “Before VERA<sup>1</sup>... we had to work really hard to establish partnerships with legal firms in town and around the state.”

<sup>1</sup> The Vera Institute of Justice is funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide legal services for unaccompanied children across the US <https://www.vera.org/projects/legal-services-for-unaccompanied-children>.

Some partnerships also provide the benefits of financial and in-kind donations, volunteer or mentor support, or foster parent recruitment. From partnerships among service providers that promote service delivery, to educational and employment opportunities, to increased access to leisure activities, participants described collaboration at the organization level to be beneficial to UC as they adjust to the community.

## Intervention Strategies

### Community Relationships

Social support and social connections are critical to the success of immigrants in the US (Lustig et al., 2004) and can help to reduce mental health distress (Elsayed et al., 2019). A major asset to adjustment and an intervention strategy described by participants were the relationships that UC build with community members. 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.” The codes within this theme included emotional support people, the relationships gained through volunteering in the community and giving back, friends outside of the foster care program, and mentoring. In some instances, they referenced formal mentoring programs, some mentioned culturally matched mentors, and others referenced community supports more generally- describing extracurricular activities or access to diverse social connections in the community. Therefore, we describe the remaining findings under two subcategories of mentors and other community connections.

**Mentors.** Focus group/interview participants 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. Many mentors develop long-term relationships with UC in the program that last into adulthood. A therapist noted that 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.” A caseworker explained, “it’s an extra person who is not [agency] affiliated to talk about issues around culture and community, someone to go out with into the community... [someone] to take them out and have those interactions in the community.” Participants of multiple roles agreed that

formal mentoring programs were beneficial to UC in the long term foster care program.

**Community connections.** Focus group participants described how the youth made community connections through extra-curricular activities, participation in athletics (e.g. soccer and other sports teams), 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.” A case manager 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.” A group home worker acknowledged that UC need “people they can trust outside of their mentor, they need multiple people to provide support.” And a foster care supervisor 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. In general, participants felt that the relationships UC build should include both formal and informal mentors and friends.

### Access to Healthcare

Unaccompanied immigrant children commonly face barriers to accessing health and mental health care (Marrow, 2011; Roth & Grace, 2015; Schapiro et al., 2018). Under the theme of access to healthcare the data was coded into categories including access to dental care, access to healthcare, access to mental health care, clinics, and culturally sensitive healthcare. While these focus groups/interviews did acknowledge the barriers to receiving timely, culturally relevant services in the community, there was also discussion about 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 and how the agency is successfully able to navigate these needs:

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.



## Church as a Resource

Participants frequently talked about the role of the church in the lives of UC children. Codes that fell under this theme included tangible support from church, youth participation, sense of welcome, as well as emotional and mental health support. A caseworker noted that “church is a big thing” for UC, and that it is a constant support system for UC as they navigate their new community. 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.” Foster care staff further described this by stating that “depending on their religion, wherever they want to go, they can go”, for example even “if they’re Muslim we try to keep them connected to their own faith.” The churches also provide tangible resources that are beneficial to UC and the agency. A case manager explained, “the churches have adopted our kids- at Christmas time our office is overflowing with gifts for our kids, on birthdays too.”

A case manager 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. While the church is a place of worship, these results highlight that it is also an intervention that provides a place of safety and familiarity, and a source of tangible and intangible resources to UC.

## Discussion

This study suggests ways that the larger systems and communities can engage in both prevention and intervention work in order to help minimize the human rights violations that UC face as they adjust to their communities- especially those in the foster care program. The federal government has invested significant time and money in providing foster care services for unaccompanied immigrant children, but there is little research to understand how this group of UC in foster care are influenced by the systems and communities in which they interact daily.

## Welcoming Communities

In recent years, popular media highlighted welcoming communities and the advocacy work done to ensure that

municipalities have welcoming policies, such as the movement to become sanctuary cities and Welcoming America’s effort to certify communities that intentionally connect and include all people (DeSantis, 2018; Gurnah, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2018; Salt Lake County, n.d.; Welcoming America, 2021). 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 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). This initiative stalled under the Trump Administration, but there is again public attention on the need for our communities to be welcoming under the current Biden Administration. Immigrant integration policy at the national level, and the idea of welcoming communities, is an intervention to promote social inclusion for immigrant children (Ham et al., 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.

For unaccompanied immigrant children in foster care, the surrounding community provides the venue through which they can experience many aspects of life. While the foster family or group home, and the foster care agency are instrumental in providing experiences, there are some that are beneficial to be directly in the mainstream community. 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, and therefore it is critical that foster parents and staff help UC to develop skills to participate in their communities. While UC go through a semi-structured cultural orientation program and independent living skills training as part of the long term foster care program, participants in this study felt that 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 some of these youth, it is important for them to explore and develop a sense of safety in their host community in the US. This context of the differences between home country and the new US community is critical for service providers to acknowledge so that they can work to diminish what we know to be human rights violations, but that may be perceived by UC as normal. 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 III and colleagues (2021) that show UC from Central America

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 long term foster care (ORR, 2015). Yet, the service providers expressed that the communities did not always have enough vocational program slots to allow all interested UC to participate. In other instances, legal documents were required for participation, whereby the existing policies are creating a 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/interviews and participants described athletic opportunities as positive spaces to build confidence, create friendships, and as an outlet for self-expression. Schapiro and colleagues (2018) found that 27% of UC said participation in sports helped their adjustment to the US, and this finding is further reflected in a large body of research (Nathan et al., 2013; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 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 (SWB, 2019). Beyond existing services, the foster care agencies often host soccer tournaments for the UC in their programs.

### Inter-agency Collaboration

Another important theme in the current study 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 among agencies. This study's results 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 et al., 2018; Morland et al., 2005).

### Community Relationships

The importance of community relationships emerged as a very salient theme as an intervention and also a protective factor 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 participants 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 helped with future orientation and beliefs about what they could accomplish (Spencer et al., 2018). Similarly, community involvement and mentoring programs for refugee children were a protective factor in terms of their stress and mental health (Lustig et al., 2004; Markham, 2012).

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. However, research also tells us that relationships with persons in the community who are US-born can enable the child to advance their social capital through bridges to more distant friends and colleagues or linkages to persons higher up the social ladder (Hutchison, 2017; Organisation for economic co-operation and development [OECD], n.d.; Putnam, 2001). These linkages are important when it comes to finding future employment, accessing higher education and other means of achieving success in the US. These connections to people of similar cultural backgrounds can also help UC to make meaning of the systemic racism and inequalities in the US and how they will impact the youth's life over time.

### Access to Healthcare

The current study highlights access to physical and mental health care as an important community level factor that improves 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; Schapiro et al., 2018). While findings from the current study support the notion that there are not enough bilingual and bicultural clinicians or low cost services available (Evans et al., 2018; Roth & Grace, 2015), participants also discussed 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. This suggests that other long term foster care providers might want to assess existing group psychoeducation courses and determine if they should be adapted for UC specifically.

## Church as a Resource

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 et al., 2016). Abu Raiya and Pargament (2010) discuss the role of religious leaders as informal mental health supports for their members, and Villatoro and colleagues (2016) note the importance of faith-based organizations in accessing and administering mental health services.

## Limitations

While multiple 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, had we spoke directly to UC, rather than adult proxies. However, given that UC are in the custody of the ORR, they were unable to participate per federal regulations. Additionally, the participants in this study were largely people who hold power over UC and this dynamic is important to note in how they view the community and systems as enabling, or holding back UC. There are many 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 is not necessarily generalizable to the larger population of UC in foster care.

It is also important to note that the participants in this study were specifically talking about UC in foster care, even if they do work with UC in other capacities. Therefore, the findings cannot necessarily be applied to UC living in the community with sponsors as they lack the structure and support of the foster care agency. Nor can the findings be directly applied to the ORR Unaccompanied Refugee Minor foster care program as the participants in that program are from around the world, and they generally have legal eligibility to remain in the US, so community engagement may look different.

## Implications

### Research Implications

The results of this study provide a basis for further and enhanced research into the role of the community and how it influences the process of adjustment that UC in foster care experience. More research is needed on welcoming policies- at the agency, local, state, and federal level- and how they impact the lives of UC. Additionally, more research is needed to compare outcomes for UC with mentors, those with culturally matched mentors, and those without mentors to better understand the role that mentors play in adjustment for UC. The quality of research being conducted would be improved if it were longitudinal, 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.

Lastly, our knowledge would be greatly enhanced if researchers were able to interview UC themselves. Therefore, to create this opportunity would require significant advocacy efforts to change existing policies within the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Researchers should collaborate with existing youth advisory boards at UC serving agencies to collectively advocate to ORR for interested UC to be able to engage in research. Given the human rights violations that some UC face while in care (Gonzales, 2018; Gonzales, 2019; Hauslohner & Sacchetti, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Krueger et al., 2019) it is important that these children have the ability to speak up for themselves and be active participants in improving the system. Lastly, it is important to note here that despite the fact that the US has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), it supports children being involved in processes such as research for the purposes of knowledge production about children. Social workers are trained in both advocacy work and community-engaged research, and therefore we suggest they initiate conversations and invite UC, other service providers, mentors, and community members to build a youth-led team and advocate for change.

### Practice Implications

This study highlights promising prevention strategies that can assist UC as they adjust to the US such as welcoming communities, and inter-agency collaboration. The participants also suggested interventions such as building up community relationships, adapting healthcare access, and creating partnerships with the church. Social workers and service providers, alongside UC, should work to advocate that ORR policy both mandate and fund mentoring programs for all UC. LIRS and their network of UC providing

agencies could consider having all social work interns across agencies work together to develop policy recommendations for ORR as part of their social work internship which is similar to the roles described by Evans and colleagues (2020). Not all long term foster care programs have existing relationships with churches in their community, as not all are religiously affiliated, but the implications of this study suggest that it could aid UC in adjustment and therefore agencies should build relationships and work together when feasible.

While the data analyzed in this study were collected before COVID-19, the current nature of electronic and internet-based communication provides interesting implications for the future. The results suggest that community engagement, welcoming communities, and social/mentoring relationships are all important to UC well-being. Virtual communication allows for communication to happen across geographic ranges, such as with family in home country, and allows for ease of translation (Zoom, 2022). UC serving agencies should continue to allow and telehealth to continue post COVID-19, as it can reduce stigma, save time and money on transportation, and improve access to care (Garcia, n.d.). However, it should be noted that Greenberg and colleagues (2021) mention some challenges with delivering formal services virtually such as confidentiality and lack of access to electronic devices. Therefore, we note this as an area where researchers should continue to evaluate the benefits and effectiveness of telehealth for immigrant groups.

## Conclusions

Our findings discuss the perspectives of UC service providers in two communities and what mechanisms they perceive—based on their work—are significant in facilitating adjustment of UC in ORR's long term foster care program into US communities. There are many positive aspects of communities, and we find that they are integrated as they work together to better the adjustment of unaccompanied immigrant children. For example, the community is a place where youth can practice many skills they learn, but it is also the place in which they access healthcare and participate in the church, each of which emerged as salient themes in this study.

Katiuzhinsky and Okech (2014) call for social workers to refocus on human rights rather than solely focusing on presenting client needs. Within the US, there is a popular sentiment and rhetoric around UC and undocumented immigrants, that indicates that these people are undeserving of a fruitful life in the US due to their lack of documentation (Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, n.d.). 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.

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