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To cite this article: Robert G. Hasson III, Caitlin Corbett, Antonia Diaz-Valdez, Kerri Evans, Thomas M. Crea & Dawnya Underwood (2022): Educational Services for Unaccompanied Immigrant Children in the United States, *Journal of Social Service Research*, DOI: [10.1080/01488376.2022.2096746](https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2022.2096746)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2022.2096746>



Published online: 25 Jul 2022.



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## Educational Services for Unaccompanied Immigrant Children in the United States

Robert G. Hasson III<sup>a</sup>, Caitlin Corbett<sup>b</sup>, Antonia Diaz-Valdez<sup>c</sup>, Kerri Evans<sup>d</sup>, Thomas M. Crea<sup>e</sup> and Dawnya Underwood<sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island, USA; <sup>b</sup>Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA; <sup>c</sup>Society and Health Research Center, Universidad Mayor-Chile, Santiago, Chile; <sup>d</sup>University of Maryland Baltimore County, Baltimore, Maryland, USA; <sup>e</sup>Boston College School of Social Work, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA; <sup>f</sup>Heartland Alliance International, Chicago, Illinois, USA

### ABSTRACT

Some unaccompanied children (UC) who migrate to the United States (US) receive post-release services (PRS) to help them adjust to the US and access community-based supports. Upon their arrival to the US, UC discuss their need(s) with their PRS caseworker in order to identify their primary needs. This study examines factors associated with UC who reported education services as a primary PRS need. The sample is based on administrative data shared by a major nonprofit in the US that provides technical support for PRS for UC throughout the US ( $n=851$ ). The cross-sectional research design includes a binomial logit regression model. Older UC have higher odds of reporting educational services as a primary need and UC placed with their mothers have lower odds of reporting education services as a primary need. The results can inform how education professionals and social services assess the needs of vulnerable immigrants. For example, older UC may require additional support with navigating barriers for accessing education. Conversely, UC who are placed with their mother may require less support with accessing education. Future research includes examining education levels and need for education support, and qualitative methods that describe how family dynamics inform the need for education services.

### KEYWORDS

Immigration;  
education;  
integration;  
unaccompanied children

### Introduction

Unaccompanied children (UC) are a vulnerable group of immigrants in the United States (US) who have no lawful immigration status, are under 18 years old, and who do not have a parent or legal guardian in the US or a parent or legal guardian in the US is not available to provide physical custody and care (Administration for Children & Families, 2021). Increasing numbers of UC have migrated to the US in recent years, rising from 13,625 referrals to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in 2012 to 69,488 referrals in 2019 (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2021). Research shows that UC experience various types of trauma before arrival to the US, including exposure to community violence in their country of origin (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014) and

sexual exploitation during their migration journey (UNICEF, 2016).

After apprehension at the US border, US officials support UC and facilitate placement with sponsors in the US. UC sometimes receive community-based services called Post Release Services (PRS) when 1) a home study is deemed necessary to assess safe placement, 2) if the child is placed with a non-relative sponsor, or 3) if the child and sponsor would benefit from additional support to facilitate their placement in the US. The number of UC receiving PRS in the US has risen in recent years, from 8,618 in 2015 to 15,160 in 2020 (ORR, 2021). There is limited research on these youth's needs upon their arrival to the US, and this gap in research limits the ability of policy makers and practitioners to support UC after their placement in host

communities. This exploratory study aims to address this gap by examining factors associated with a primary PRS need that UC report upon their arrival to the US: educational services.

### **Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the United States**

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of UC arriving to the US. Of the 122,731 unaccompanied children who were referred to ORR for support with placement in the US in 2021, most were between 15 and 16 years old (39%), followed by 17 years old (33%), 0-12 years old (16%), and 13-14 years old (13%). Since 2012, the overwhelming majority of UC have migrated to the US from the Central American Countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In 2021, nearly half of all UC arrived from Guatemala (47%), followed by Honduras (32%), El Salvador (13%), Mexico (1%), and other countries (7%). Since 2012, most youth migrating to the US identify as male, with 66% of all UC referred to ORR in 2021 identifying as male (ORR, 2021). Research indicates that many children experience complex trauma during their arrival to the US (UNHRC, 2014).

UC are a vulnerable group of immigrants because of the factors that influence their migration to the US, trauma they experience during their migration journey, and trauma experienced at the US border and after their apprehension by US Border Patrol. According to research conducted by UNHCR (2014), there are various factors influencing a child's migration to the US. In one study of 404 UC apprehended in the US, 70% reported that their reason for migrating to the US was either community violence in their country of origin, abuse in their home, pervasive poverty, or the prospect of reunifying with family who live in the US (UNHCR, 2014). One primary reason for migration to the US is community violence, and research indicates 66% of children from El Salvador, 20% of children from Guatemala, and 44% of children from Honduras reported experiencing community violence prior to their migration to the US (UNHCR, 2014).

Upon arrival to the US, there are various pathways through the US immigration system that

UC must navigate. While there are important differences in pathways to services for these youth who arrive to the US (Hasson et al., 2019), the focus of this study is on a sample of UC who received Post Release Services in the US.

### **Post Release Services**

Post Release Services (PRS) are case management supports that help UC navigate communities after their reunification with a sponsor in the US. ORR refers youth for PRS if a home study was required, if the youth was released to a non-relative sponsor, or if ORR determines the youth and sponsor would benefit from additional supports to facilitate safe adjustment to the community. PRS provides an array of supports for UC, including placement and stability support, accessing legal services, education services, and health and mental health services (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2018).

PRS are provided in two different levels, which differ depending on the child's needs. Level one services provide UC and their sponsors with support accessing various community services (i.e. education, legal, or health or mental health services) providing services by meeting with a youth once per month. Level two services support additional safety and permanency needs by engaging with children and sponsors once per month, conducting ongoing needs assessments, and facilitating access to higher level therapeutic services. For most UC, PRS last for 90 days. However, for UC who meet criteria for the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA), PRS remain in place throughout a UC's legal proceedings, or when the UC turns 18. The criteria for TVPRA include youth who have been victims of human trafficking, youth who have a disability as defined by the Americans with Disability Act, youth who have been the victim of physical or sexual abuse, or the youth's sponsor presents as a risk for physical or sexual abuse or human trafficking. A UC's legal case is closed under three conditions: if the UC is granted voluntary departure, receives an order for removal, or obtains an immigration status (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2018).

Research identifies the importance of PRS for UC, and also highlights important gaps that UC must navigate. Roth and Grace (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with 19 UC who were receiving PRS in the US and found that connecting youth with education services was not as difficult as connecting them with legal or mental health services. However, some schools exhibited resistance when PRS workers tried to enroll UC, and this resistance was related to lack of documentation needed for school enrollment. This resulted in PRS workers helping youth and families access necessary documentation and also educating school communities on the importance of education for UC. An additional main finding from this research is the importance of location, and specifically how access to community supports was more challenging in rural or suburban locations where transportation challenges can impede access (Roth & Grace, 2015). This is important context, given the vital role of education for immigrants in the US, including UC.

### Education and Immigration

Education is an especially important facilitator of integration for immigrants in the US. Part of this dynamic centers on the positive correlation between education level and income level, which helps drive social mobility for immigrants in the US (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2015). Education provides immigrants tools for integration, such as language skills. More broadly, school settings help promote integration for vulnerable immigrants, such as refugee children, because they help establish social connections and relationships that enhance social capital and promote social mobility (Ager & Strang, 2008). In addition, education-based mental health services can help vulnerable immigrants, such as UC, cope with and manage symptoms related to migration-related trauma (Franco, 2018).

There are notable differences in education levels by country of origin, with immigrants from Asia and Africa having higher education attainment, and immigrants from Latin America and Caribbean nations having lower education attainment (NASEM, 2015). These differences, in part,

help explain the challenges some immigrant groups in the US experience in terms of social mobility across generations. Furthermore, among men ages 25-59, Mexican immigrants have the lowest education attainment of 9.4 years and more than half (55%) have less than a high school education (NASEM, 2015). Education attainment for men from Central America is also low, compared to other immigrant groups, at 9.8 years, and nearly half (48%) have less than a high school education. This body of research shows similar trends for adult immigrant women as well (NASEM, 2015).

UC are a population of immigrants who face unique barriers to accessing education in the US, such as providing correct documentation for school enrollment (Evans et al., 2020). Other immigrants, such as refugees, face similar barriers to accessing education opportunities. Anselme and Hands (2010) found limited legal protections as well as limited services to address education gaps as a result of forced migration as two notable challenges refugees face when trying to access education. Similarly, Menjivar (2008) found that gray areas in legal eligibility influence perceptions of education access for immigrants in the US. This uncertainty regarding legal status is part of why immigrants from both El Salvador and Guatemala have some of the lowest education levels among immigrants in the US.

A growing body of research highlights how these barriers contribute to differences in education outcomes for UC from Central America. For example, in a study of 193 children who discharged from the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) Program, Crea and colleagues (2017) found that URM from Guatemala, compared to URM from other countries, have more than eight times the odds of being enrolled in K12 education settings, whereas URM from Honduras, compared to URM from other countries, have 76% lower odds of being enrolled in a college setting. In addition, longer lengths of stay in the URM program is associated with higher education attainment. Specifically, longer lengths of stay in the URM program are associated with greater odds of having a high school diploma or being enrolled in college. This research also found that legal permanency (i.e. having a Green Card) is

associated with greater odds of having a high school diploma (Crea et al., 2018).

In similar research, Evans et al. (2018), examined education outcomes in a sample of 30 UC enrolled in the URM program. This research found that most URM (86%) had earned a high school diploma or GED by the time they discharged from the URM program, and that half (50%) were enrolled in college at their time of discharge from the URM program. This research also demonstrates how URM perceive education as an important component to social mobility, as most URM in the sample (60%) reported wanting to continue their education after leaving the URM program.

UC experience unique challenges with accessing education, including family reunification, interruptions in their formal education due to migrating to the US, and mental distress related to trauma experienced prior to, during, and after their migration to the US. Furthermore, a growing body of evidence is highlighting how school districts in the US are responding to meet these needs and support UC in school settings. Pierce (2015) identifies a variety of supports implemented by some US school districts, including specialized programs to address social-emotional needs, bi-lingual parent volunteers to help UC sponsor families navigate school systems, and job skills-training programs for UC who will not earn a high school diploma by the time they turn 21 years old. Family contexts are an important part of education outcomes for immigrants in the US, and is a particular focus of this study. Additionally, a qualitative study by Evans et al. (2022) discussed how some schools go beyond offering UC academic and language assistance such as tutoring, and intentionally cooperate with service providers (e.g. teacher communicating with ORR social worker) in order to provide more holistic services.

### **Education and Immigrant Family Contexts**

Little is known about the impact of family context on education outcomes for UC, and this is an area of interest for the current study. However, a much larger body of research demonstrates the importance of family and parenting contexts in

supporting immigrant students in education settings. Research indicates that family is central to the identity of Latinx immigrant families, and individual identity is formed as part of belonging to a family system. Furthermore, an important characteristic of family for Latinx immigrants is “familismo”, which recognizes the central importance of love, loyalty, and respect in family systems (Fischer et al., 2009; Suizzo et al., 2012). Within family systems, parenting styles are associated with different aspects of education outcomes for immigrant children.

Research shows that Latino adolescents who perceive their mother as having high academic expectations have a higher grade point average, compared to having mother’s with low academic expectations (GPA) (Henry et al., 2008). Henry and colleagues (2008) found that parental involvement in students’ lives (e.g. monitoring of activities, knowledge of peer relationships) is associated with greater student motivation and improved student achievement. This finding has been replicated in other Latino immigrant groups. For example, in research on Mexican immigrant parenting in the US, Suizzo and colleagues (2012) found that messages about the importance of school that parents communicate to their children is positively associated with children exhibiting determination in the context of school. This further leads to attaining a higher GPA, indicating positive academic outcomes. Similarly, Carlo et al. (2018) found that, among Mexican-American immigrant families, maternal parenting styles, compared to paternal parenting styles, are associated with higher levels of prosocial behavior and academic achievement among children. In addition, mothers exhibiting less involvement or are moderately demanding of their children is associated with children exhibiting negative prosocial behaviors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Education attainment is an important component of immigrant integration in the US (NASEM, 2015). The study is guided by the social ecological framework, which posits that both individual and ecological characteristics are important for understanding health and wellbeing. Berger



Cardoso and colleagues (2019) explain that certain ecological characteristics in post-migration contexts are especially important for UC in the US, such as school programming that responds to their unique needs. An important gap in research is a lack of understanding what factors contribute to UC's reporting education as a primary PRS need. To address this gap, the study examines how both individual (e.g. age, sex) and ecological (e.g. family context) characteristics are associated with needing education services upon resettlement in the US. The following research questions guide this study:

1. To what extent is age associated with education services as a primary PRS need?
2. To what extent is sex associated with education services as a primary PRS need?
3. To what extent is country of origin associated with education services as a primary PRS need?
4. To what extent is sponsor type associated with education services as a primary PRS need?

## Method

### Sample

The sample for the current study includes all unaccompanied children who discharged from PRS in 2019 from Heartland Alliance International partner agencies ( $n=851$ ). The majority of UC migrated from Central America, specifically Guatemala (45.4%), Honduras (33.1%), and El Salvador (13.4%). A total of 16 other countries are represented in the sample, including Mexico (2.0%), Nicaragua (1.4%), India (1.3%), and Ecuador (1.2%). The remaining countries of origin in the sample each constitute less than one percent of the sample (Bangladesh, Bahamas, China, Nigeria, United States, Vietnam, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Romania). Data were derived from administrative databases from a national nonprofit serving UC in the US. Caseworkers entered data into an electronic case management system, and data were shared with researchers using Excel spreadsheets. The purpose of the database is to collect and store information

about UC in the US, and use the database as a tracking tool to facilitate PRS throughout the US. The data are collected as part of contracts provided by ORR. The study's use of administrative data builds on an existing body of research that has used administrative data to examine education outcomes for UC (Crea et al., 2018).

The study protocol was approved by a college IRB that had oversight of the project, and Heartland Alliance agreed to sharing deidentified data. See Table 1 for demographic statistics. Listwise deletion was used to handle missing data due to the small percentage of missing cases. Length of stay and sex had missing information – 3% ( $n=27$ ) and 0.3% ( $n=3$ ) respectively. Additionally, one case was missing sponsor type (0.1%).

### Measures

The dependent variable in the study is the primary PRS need "education services". UC reported this if they needed support with accessing education systems. Education services was a dichotomous variable measuring if a UC reported education services as their primary need prior to beginning PRS in the US (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Prior to release from shelter, UC are asked by caseworkers to describe their primary need, or the part of their life that needs the most support. Needs that UC identify include case management services to support education, mental health services, family stabilization, legal, medical, placement stability, substance use, gang prevention, and guardianship needs. UC are asked to identify their primary needs to help focus the case management services. Additional variables in the study include length of stay in PRS (*months*), age (*years*), sex (1 = male, 0 = female) (non-binary was not an option in the administrative database, and was not able to be included in analyses), and three separate dichotomous variables measuring country of origin for El Salvador (1 = Yes, 0 = No); Guatemala (1 = Yes, 0 = No); and Honduras (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Finally, the study includes a variable for sponsor type, which measures the type of sponsor a UC resided with while receiving PRS (1 = Mother, 0 = Other; 1 = Father, 0 = Other; 1 = Unrelated (i.e. family friend), 0 = Other). Additional relatives to

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and differences for education services.

	Education services (N=219)		Other PRS need (N=632)	
	Mean (SE)	n (%)	Mean (SE)	n (%)
<i>Months in care</i> **	7.15 (3.62)		9.81 (11.11)	
<i>Age at discharge</i>	16.29 (2.71)		15.51 (3.95)	
<i>Gender (male)</i> **		144 (65.75)		336 (53.16)
<i>Sponsor Type</i>				
Mother***		32 (14.61)		181 (28.64)
Father***		30 (13.70)		81 (12.82)
Unrelated***		26 (11.87)		91 (14.40)
Other***		131 (59.82)		279 (44.14)
<i>Country of origin</i>				
El Salvador***		23 (10.50)		91 (14.40)
Guatemala***		13 (5.936)		256 (40.51)
Honduras***		52 (23.74)		230 (36.39)
Other***		14 (6.4)		55 (8.7)

Notes: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

which UC were reunified include aunt, uncle, brother, sister, grandmother, grandfather, brother-in-law, or sister-in-law.

### Data Analysis

Analyses included univariate and bivariate analyses to first explore the data patterns and second to test significant differences between education services and the variables of interest. Bivariate tests included chi-square tests for categorical level data and Mann-Whitney tests for interval level data. Binomial logit regression with clustering by state was used to explore the association between education services and various control variables including age, sex, length of PRS, country of origin, and sponsor type. Clustering was used instead of hierarchical

models, as the intraclass-correlation was 0%. Thus, there was no variance explained at the State level. However, to take into account the data structure clustering at the State level was used instead – State at which they received PRS. Results of the binomial logit regression analyses are presented as odds ratios in Table 2. All analyses were conducted using Stata version 15.

### Results

The total sample includes 851 UC who received PRS in 2019. Of the total sample, 219 UC reported education services as a primary need, comprising 25.7% of the total sample. Significantly more UC who reported education services as a primary need migrated from Guatemala (59.4%), followed by Honduras (23.7%), and El Salvador

**Table 2.** Logit regression model for education primary need.

	Education services (N=851)
	OR (CI)
<i>Months in care</i>	0.74** (0.61–0.88)
<i>Age at discharge</i>	1.33* (1.02–1.73)
<i>Sex (male)</i>	1.60** (1.17–2.18)
<i>Country of origin (Other)</i>	
El Salvador	1.20 (0.59–2.44)
Guatemala	1.88* (1.15–3.07)
Honduras	0.91 (0.51–1.66)
<i>Sponsor type (Other)</i>	
Mother	0.45* (0.22–0.92)
Father	0.87 (0.58–1.33)
Unrelated	0.55* (0.33–0.91)
Constant	0.18
AIC	924.85
BIC	972.31

Notes: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

(10.5%) ( $p < .001$ ). The majority of UC who reported education as a primary need were male (65.8%), compared to female ( $p < .01$ ), and the mean age at their time of discharge was 16.3 years old ( $SD = 2.7$ ). The mean length of PRS was 7.2 months ( $SD = 3.6$ ), which is significantly shorter than UC who reported other primary needs (9.82,  $SD = 11.11$ ) ( $p < .05$ ). UC who reported education as a primary need resided with their mother (14.6%), father (13.7%), or an unrelated person (11.9%). A substantial number of UC also resided with a sponsor type classified as “other” (59.8%).

Results of binomial logit regression analyses showed that each additional month of PRS is associated with 26% lower odds of reporting education services as a primary PRS need ( $OR = 0.74$ ,  $CI = 0.61-0.88$ ,  $p < .01$ ), holding all other variables constant. Each additional year in age is associated with 33% higher odds of reporting education services as a primary PRS need ( $OR = 1.33$ ,  $CI = 1.02-1.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ), holding all other variables constant. Male UC, compared to female UC, have 60% higher odds of reporting education services as a primary need ( $OR = 1.60$ ,  $CI = 1.71-2.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), holding all other variables constant. UC from Guatemala, compared to UC from other countries, have 88% higher odds of reporting education services as a primary PRS need ( $OR = 1.88$ ,  $CI = 1.15-3.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ), holding all other variables constant. UC who are placed with their biological mothers, compared to placement with other sponsor types, have 55% lower odds of reporting education services as a primary need ( $OR = 0.45$ ,  $CI = 0.22-0.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ), holding all other variables constant. Finally, UC who are placed with an unrelated sponsor, compared to other sponsor types, have 45% lower odds of reporting education services as a primary PRS need ( $OR = 0.55$ ,  $CI = 0.33-0.91$ ,  $p < .05$ ), holding all other variables constant.

## Discussion

Unaccompanied children are a vulnerable group of immigrants who have been arriving in increasing numbers since 2012, with most arriving at the US/Mexico border from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras (ORR, 2021). After

arrival at the US border, some UC receive PRS upon their placement with a sponsor, to help with their adjustment to the US. Prior to starting PRS, UC are able to communicate to shelter staff their primary PRS need. In the current study, 25.7% of the sample reported education as their most pressing need – the highest of any other reported needs.

The study's first research question focused on the extent to which age is associated with reporting education services as a primary PRS need. Results indicate older youth are more likely to report education services as their primary need, perhaps because they recognize the need for support in navigating the complexities of the US education system, potentially including higher education settings. This interpretation aligns with the mean age of UC in the current sample (16.3 years,  $SD = 2.7$ ) which approaches the end of secondary school and the age of transitioning to higher education. Previous research on education outcomes for unaccompanied refugee minors shows that older unaccompanied refugee minors are less likely to be enrolled in a K-12 education setting at their time of admission to the URM foster care program (Crea et al., 2018). In the context of the current study, this research helps explain why older unaccompanied children beginning PRS identify education services as their primary need.

The second research question focused on the extent to which sex is associated with reporting education services as a primary PRS need. Results from the study show that male youth were 60% more likely to report education services as a primary PRS need compared to female youth. Existing research on UC educational outcomes shows that males were less likely to be enrolled in a K-12 education setting and more than two times as likely to be enrolled in a college program at their time of discharge (Crea et al., 2018). Yet, these were youth who had been living in the US for some time, compared with the current sample who reported their primary need upon arrival to the US border, and before starting PRS in their host community. It is possible that male youth see education as a means of advancing their situations, and indeed, boys in Central America are more likely to drop out of school due to



economic reasons, compared to girls (Adelman & Székely, 2016). In this case, the systematic disadvantages experienced by girls in their countries of origin may be manifesting as being less likely to identify education as a need.

An alternative interpretation of this finding is that male UC may be seeking education support as a means to escape community and gang-related violence. Lorenzen (2017) examined the reasons UC from Central America migrate to the US and found that UC who reported migrating to the US due to a combination of escaping violence and pursuing education opportunities were overwhelmingly male (95.7%). In addition, the majority of UC who reported migrating only in search of opportunities such as education were over age 15 years old (81.4%), which aligns with the mean age of UC in the current study (16.29,  $SD=2.71$ ). Furthermore, UC who flee their country of origin because of gang violence were more likely to seek education opportunities as a way to avoid such violence (Lorenzen, 2017).

The third research question focused on the extent to which country of origin is associated with reporting education services as a primary PRS need, and results show that significant variation emerged by country of origin. Youth from Guatemala, compared to UC from other countries, have 88% higher odds of reporting education services as a primary PRS need. This finding complements existing research that indicates UC from Guatemala, compared to UC from other countries, are more than eight times as likely to be in a K-12 education setting at their time of discharge from the URM program (Crea et al., 2018) suggesting that their educational trajectories may be delayed. One explanation for the current study's finding is related to the unique cultural context of Guatemala. Youth from Guatemala often do not speak English or Spanish, but rather one of the 21 indigenous language such as K'iche' or Kaqchikel (Crea et al., 2018). This situation places youth at a distinct disadvantage in US schools, and research shows that UC from Guatemala are often isolated from their peers in school because of discrimination based on language ability (Capps et al., 2020). Youth from Guatemala may report education support

as a primary PRS need as a means of developing language skills that can facilitate integration. Important areas of future research include examining how PRS might support UC from Guatemala in developing language skills and with managing distress from perceived discrimination.

Finally, the fourth research question focused on the extent to which sponsor type is associated with reporting education services as a primary PRS need. Unaccompanied children who are placed with their biological mothers have 55% lower odds of reporting education services as a primary PRS need, compared to other sponsor types. To date, little research exists to illuminate the role sponsor type has in the wellbeing of UC. Existing research does indicate Latinx children who have mothers with high academic expectations have greater academic achievement, and increased parental involvement in academics is associated with greater academic achievement for Latinx adolescents (Henry et al., 2008). In addition, Carlo et al. (2018) found that maternal parenting styles are associated with greater prosocial behavior for Mexican-American adolescents. Together, this body of research may help explain the finding that UC who are placed with their mothers are less likely to report education services as a primary PRS need. UC placed with their mothers may be less likely to report education services as a primary PRS need because their mothers already communicate high expectations for academic achievement and demonstrate high levels of involvement in their life. This is an important area for future research to understand this dynamic.

The findings of the study can be further understood in the context of the social-ecological theoretical framework (Cardoso et al., 2019). The findings demonstrate that both individual factors (e.g. sex, age) and ecological factors (e.g. country of origin, family setting) both contribute to wellbeing. Wellbeing for the purposes of this study refers to accessing education services, which research shows is an important component of immigrant integration in the US (NASEM, 2015). This study highlights how individual factors such as older age and identifying as male are associated with greater need for education services.

Conversely, family setting, which is an ecological factor, is associated with less need for education services. The results suggest that placement with mothers provides a protective element that appears to reduce the need for education services. Continued research into the protective role of ecological factors, such as families and school communities, is an important area of future inquiry (Cardoso et al., 2019).

### **Limitations**

This study has limitations. First, the convenience sample of UC in the study were recipients of PRS. Therefore, results are not generalizable to UC who did not receive PRS, who receive PRS through other service providers, or who navigate other paths through the US immigration system. The design of the study is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to examine education needs over time and to draw causal inferences between independent and dependent variables. The dependent variable, need for education services, as well as covariates, are based on secondary data gathered from an administrative data, which limits the ability to assess reliability and validity. Importantly, while many UC identified education as a primary need, it does not mean that educational services would not be helpful for all UC. Language ability is not included in the administrative dataset, which may help explain the extent to which UC might report education services as a primary need. Finally, a limitation of the current study is not knowing the education levels of UC as they arrive to the US border. Given the nature of the administrative dataset from which this study is based, this variable was not available and is an important area of future research.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

This study builds on previous research on education outcomes for UC in the US (Crea et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2020) and seeks to understand what factors influence UC needing education services after they arrive at the US border. Because older UC appear to be more likely to report education services as a primary need, advocates and

service providers may need to help UC navigate challenging education settings, including post-secondary settings that older adolescents encounter. This finding complements existing research which identifies proper documentation as a barrier UC face when accessing education (Evans et al., 2020). This study suggests male UC, compared to female UC, have greater odds of reporting education services as a primary need. Research shows that UC who report migrating to the US to escape gang violence and pursue education opportunities are mostly male (Lorenzen, 2017), and existing research also indicates escaping community violence is a primary reason for migrating to the US from Central America (UNHCR, 2014). School communities would benefit from adopting trauma-informed approaches to serving UC, and this recommendation aligns with a growing body of research on education policy for UC (Evans et al., 2020).

Finally, it appears placement with mothers provides UC unique benefits for accessing education supports, which can inform policy development regarding UC placement after arrival at the US border. If placement with mothers is not possible, the findings of the current study suggest that practitioners should explore how mothers can support any education aspirations their children have upon arrival to the US. For example, if the child's mother remains in the country of origin, establishing communication between the UC and their mother may help UC navigate education spaces. Additionally, after mothers, most UC in the sample who reported education services as a primary need were placed with their fathers. Practitioners may benefit from assessing how fathers can support their children with navigating the education system. Existing research indicates that some Latinx fathers, such as Puerto Rican fathers, navigate a tension between having high education expectations for their children while also feeling excluded from school communities (Quiñones & Marquez Kiyama, 2014). An important area for future research is exploring how fathers from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras perceive education and their role in their children's education.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, perhaps the greatest implications are for future research. Future research would benefit from assessing UC education levels and exploring the extent to which this is associated with perceived need of education services. A limitation of the current study is an inability to control for a UC's current education level. Presumably, UC with higher education levels would be less likely to need education services, however this question could not be answered given the nature of the administrative data. In addition, future research would benefit from using qualitative methods to examine family dynamics that inform the need for education services. For example, the finding that UC who are placed with mothers have lower odds of reporting education services as a primary PRS need is an important finding, and future qualitative research can help add context to this finding to understand in more detail what contributes to this dynamic. Post-release services are a vast network of social services that support unaccompanied children as they navigate a complex array of systems in resettlement communities. The results of this study shed light on how social services, such as Post-Release Services, can adapt to meet unaccompanied children's needs that are unique to the education system.

Education plays an important role in facilitating immigrant integration in the US and promotes social mobility for immigrants across generations (Ager & Strang, 2008; NASEM, 2015). Unaccompanied children have been arriving to the US in increasing numbers since 2012, as a result of expanded community violence and pervasive poverty, particularly in the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Given the importance of education as a driver of social mobility for immigrants - and that UC in the US have a legal right to access public education - the findings of the current study can help inform the ways in which practitioners assess the needs of immigrant students, as well as policies with regards to effective and appropriate sponsor placements.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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