An updated examination of the predictors of running away from foster care in the United States and trends over ten years (2010–2019)

Caralin Branscum, M.S.

Ph.D. Student

cbranscum@unomaha.edu

Tara Richards, Ph.D.

Distinguished Associate Professor

tararichards@unomaha.edu

Victimology and Victim Studies Research Lab (VVSRL)

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

University of Nebraska, at Omaha

Scope of the Problem

- There are over 400,000 children in foster care at any given time [12]

- Across different jurisdictions/samples, approximately 3% of children will run away or go missing from care [1]

- Characteristics: girls, older, placement instability, child behavioral issues, & prior running history, etc. [2,7,9]

- Greater risk for: alcohol and drug abuse, victimization, STDs/STIs, contacts with CJS (e.g., arrest/incarceration), poorer wellbeing outcomes, etc.[3]

Why do children runaway from care?

- Running to (access) and running from (avoidance) [1,4]

Running to (access)	Running from (avoidance)
- Normalcy and positive social supports - Running to family of origin - Friends, parties, going to sports events, etc. - Boredom	- Feeling unloved or unvalued - Negative environments (e.g., abuse) - Not having a good relationship with caregivers - Perceived restricted autonomy

Gap in the Literature

- Children who run away from care are vulnerable and in need of support
- Existing research consists of case review records and/or interviews with children/caregivers/staff from single state or jurisdictions
- Lin (2012) utilized U.S. Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) from 2009
- No work has attempted to replicate these findings

Current Study

Our **purpose** is to:

1) Provide a 10-year follow up using 2019 AFCARS data
2) Assess replicability of previous findings from Lin (2012)[8] & extant literature

Method

- Sample: 597,911 children involved in the foster care programs in 2019
  - Annual AFCARS mandatory data collection from all states
- Dependent Variable – Runaway status ("Child ran away" versus "In placement")
  - "in-placement" = (1) pre-adoptive home, (2) foster family home, relative, (3) foster family home, non-relative, (4) group home, (5) institution, and (6) trial home visit
  - Excluded: supervised independent living
- Independent/Control Variables

| Demographic	Reason for removal from family	Placement Instability & Other Relevant Measures
age, age at first removal, sex, race/ethnicity, and original family structure	physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, parent substance use (drugs or alcohol), child substance use (drugs or alcohol), child disability, child behavior problem, parent death, parent incarceration, caretaker inability to cope, abandonment, relinquishment, and inadequate housing.	duration of current placement (months), number of placements, number of removals from family of origin, and Census region and clinically diagnosed disability

Children running away from care has been *steadily declining* in the last ten years

Ten year trends for the prevalence of children running away from FC programs (2010–2019).

Year	Children in foster care programs N	Children who ran away N	Prevalence of children who ran away %
2010	534,056	7456	1.40%
2011	535,944	7340	1.37%
2012	526,366	6235	1.18%
2013	542,315	6121	1.13%
2014	569,333	6344	1.11%
2015	592,639	6537	1.10%
2016	594,285	6470	1.09%
2017	610,723	6707	1.10%
2018	608,826	6162	1.01%
2019	597,911	5867	0.98%
10-Year average	571,239	6523.90	1.14%

Figure 1. Odds Ratios for demographic characteristics predicting running behavior (N = 597,911)

Increased risk

Decreased risk
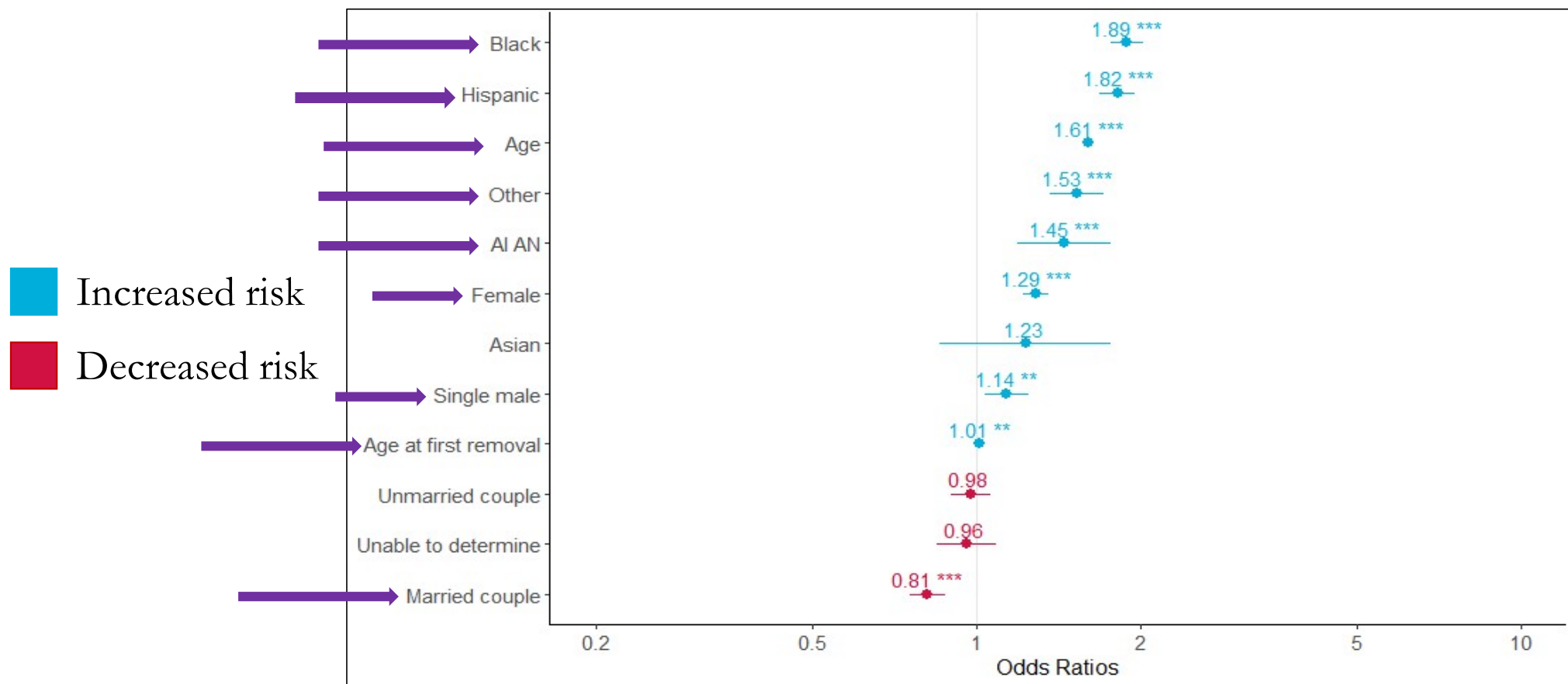
Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p< 0.001; "AI AN" refers to American Indian/Alaskan Native
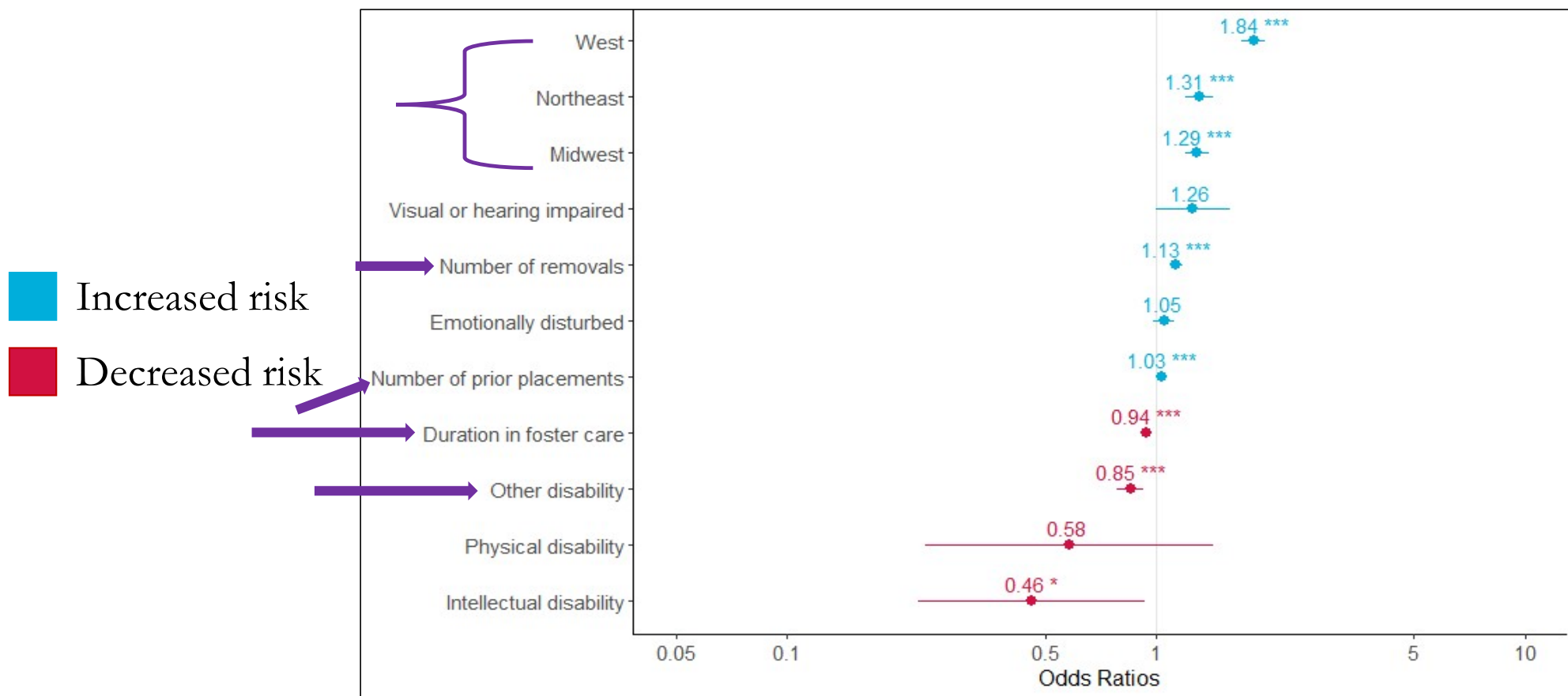Reference Categories: White & Single female household

Figure 2. Odds Ratios for removal reasons predicting running behavior (N = 597,911)
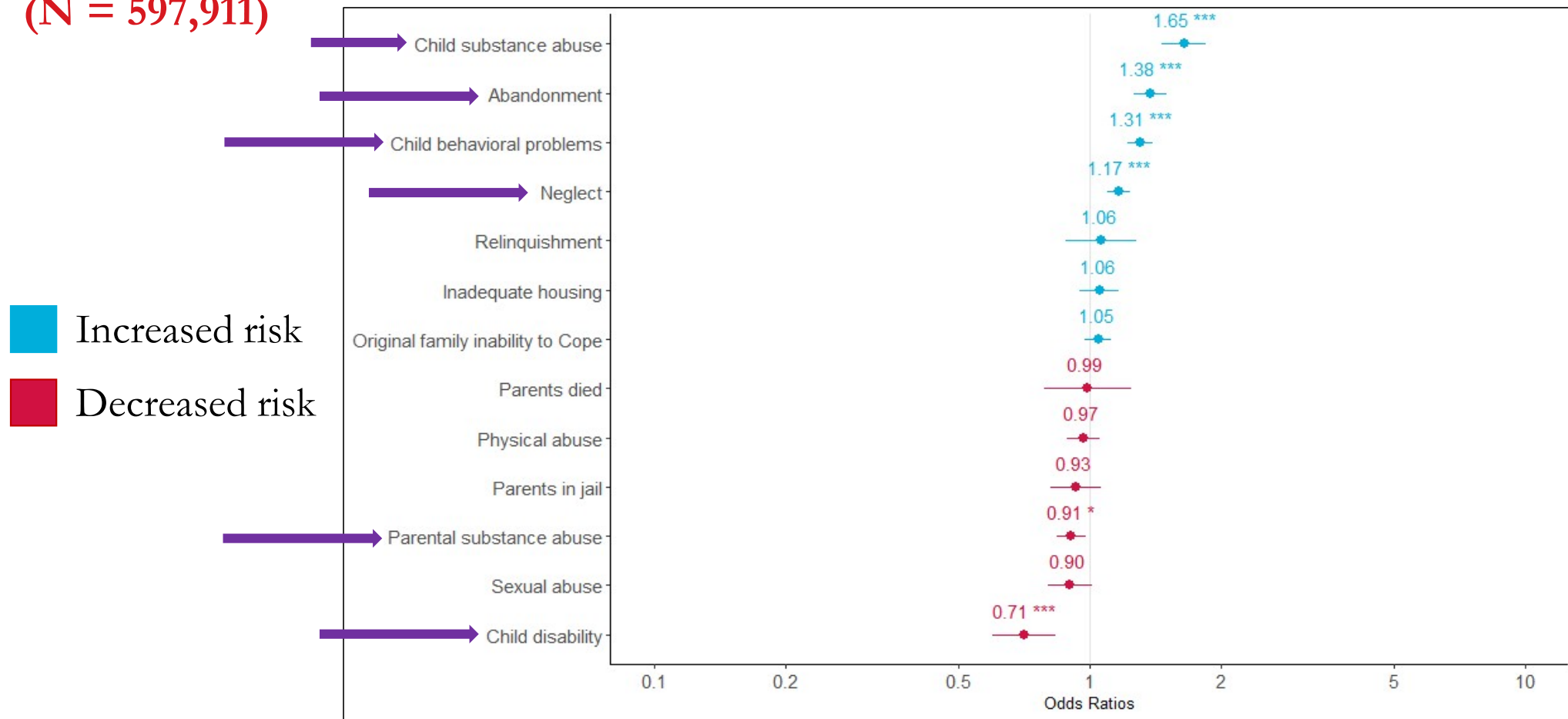
Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p< 0.001;
Removal reasons were dichotomously coded and not mutually exclusive.

Figure 3. Odds Ratios for Placement instability & other characteristics predicting running behavior (N = 597,911)

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p< 0.001;
Reference Categories: South & No disability

Discussion of Key Findings

- Findings replicated prior research (e.g., Lin (2012))
  - Consistent with explanations *running to* and *running from* behavior [1,4]
- Several demographic correlates associated with likelihood of running away from care
  - Example: Original family structure (e.g., single-parent households v. married couples)
- Prominent racial disparities (ranged 45-89% more likely to runaway, respectively)

Discussion of Key Findings

- Removal reasons are associated with increased and decreased risk
  - Neglect could lead to *running to* families of origin
  - Child substance abuse could lead to *running to* similar peers; *running from* restrictions
- Placement instability – associated with greater risk
  - # of previous placements, # of total removals, # of months in FC
  - Children may be *running from* instability and negative experiences in FC

Next Steps

- Build demographic profiles of children at "high risk" of running
- Focusing interventions/resources for children at greatest risk
  - Children with substance use disorders
    - "High-risk" of running away (65% more likely to run, respectively)
  - Racial disparities in who runs away (e.g., Black/African American children)
- Negative connotations of "runaway" phrasing
  - "Runaway" phrasing puts onus of care on the child
- Review system policies on reporting children who are not present in their placement as missing persons
  - Shift the language from "runaways" to "missing from care"

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

- Distinguishing between "running away" and "going missing"
- Point-in-time estimates

Areas of Future Research

- When/how children are identified as "runaway" v. "missing from care"
  - Limited knowledge on decision-making and policies regarding classifying children
  - Not captured by national data collection efforts
- "Running away" and "missing from care" are not separate phenomena
  - Often connected and should be studied as such

Questions? Feel free to contact!

- Caralin Branscum, M.S.
- Ph.D. Student
- University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Email: cbranscum@unomaha.edu
- Twitter: @BCaralin
- Victimology and Victim Studies Research Lab

- Tara Richards, Ph.D.
- Distinguished Associate Professor
- University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Email: tararichards@unomaha.edu
- Twitter: @Prof_TNR
- Victimology and Victim Studies Research Lab

UNIVERSITY OF Nebraska Omaha

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