



Transition from Care: The Status and Outcomes of Youth who have Aged out of the Foster Care System in Clark County, Nevada

Introduction

The United States Congress enacted the Independent Living Initiative in 1986 as the legislative framework for states to develop services that youth should receive before they are discharged from foster care. Despite more than 15 years in implementing various independent living programs nationwide, the effectiveness of these programs remains elusive. Recent studies have shown that after exiting the system at the age of majority (usually age 18), many of these youth face serious problems, including homelessness, poverty, incarceration, early pregnancy and lack of employment stability. In Clark County, Nevada, approximately 100 youth age out of the foster care system each year. In order to better understand the issues and challenges faced by this population of youth and to assist in the development of more effective interventions, the Division of Child & Family Services (DCFS) collaborated with the School of Social Work at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) on a study of former foster care youth.

Inclusion Criteria and Recruitment Efforts

Interviews (lasting between 60 to 90 minutes) were conducted with 100 youth between September 2000 and January 2001. The youth selected had been out of foster care for a minimum of 6 months. DCFS produced a computerized list of youth who were discharged at 18 (or later if they had not received their high school diploma or GED) and exited in the past three (3) years (DCFS does not keep records of youth past this time period).

Due to the difficulty in locating these youth, multiple strategies were employed to find them. Letters were sent to: all foster parents and group homes in southern Nevada; the last known address of the youth; and former foster parents and caretakers requesting the voluntary participation of the youth in the study. Flyers that advertised the study (and the \$30.00 payment for being interviewed) were posted in welfare offices, youth centers, health clinics, homeless centers, university and community colleges and coffee shops; and ads were placed in local newspapers. Social security numbers of the youth were cross-referenced with the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and the state prison system. Professional and personal contacts of individuals that have worked with these youth as well as

personal contacts from former foster care youth were also utilized to locate this population of young adults.

Results

Demographics of Youth: Out of the 218 names of youth provided by DCFS, 94 were located. Of these, 75 were interviewed. Of those not interviewed, 5 were deceased (3 from gang violence, 1 of a drug overdose and 1 died due to diabetes). Three (3) were incarcerated in out-of-state prisons, 9 did not follow through with the interview for a number of reasons, and 2 were in the military and could not be contacted. Through the recruitment outreach, an additional 25 youth were located (their status as former foster youth in southern Nevada were verified). The average age of the youth at the time of the interview was 20 and the average time spent out of foster care was 2.5 years. Most interviewees were female (55%). Forty-six percent (46%) were Caucasian, 30% African-American, 14% other (mixed, Asian or Native American) and 10% were Latino. The mean age upon entering the foster care system was 9.3 years and the average number of years spent in foster care was 8.3 years. Over 50% had 5 or more placements while in foster care (ranging from 1 to over 50).

Employment/Current Income:

Respondents generally experienced significant financial hardships; 41% indicated that they did not have enough money to cover basic living expenses. Thirty-four percent (34%) made less than \$5,000 in 1999 (60% made less than \$10,000). Doing something illegal to get money was not uncommon – 24% had supported themselves by dealing drugs at some time since leaving care; 11% had sexual intercourse in exchange for money. Most youth (63%) were employed at the time of the interview ; however, 26% had not had regular employment since leaving care - 55% had been terminated from a job at least once since leaving care. The average hourly wage of the youth who worked was \$7.25.

Education:

Fifty percent (50%) of youth left foster care without a high school degree. At the time of the interview, the number of young adults obtaining a high school degree/equivalent rose to 69%; with 30% of youth indicating they are (or had) attended college. Respondents had high aspirations when it came to higher education - 75% indicated that they wanted to obtain a college degree.

Living Arrangements:

Most youth indicated that they were living with a spouse, partner or boyfriend/girlfriend (29%), while 24% reported living with friends; 8% lived with relatives, 7% were incarcerated in a state prison, 7% were living with their birth parents; 7% lived with siblings and 3% were living with former foster parents. Since leaving foster care, a startling 36% indicated that there had been times when they did not have a place to live (19% reported living on the streets and 18% in a homeless shelter). The stability of living arrangements for many youth were questionable as 35% had moved five or more times since leaving foster care.

Health Care/Safety:

Former foster care youth reported serious health care problems. Thirty percent (30%) had a serious health problem since leaving care; 32% needed health care and could not obtain it; and

55% had no type of health insurance (25% were on Medicaid; 11% on other public assistance programs, and 9% had private insurance). Only 54% of the youth rated their health as very good or excellent.

A sizeable number had children (38%). Of the 100 youth interviewed in this project, over 70 pregnancies occurred (37 were live births; 18 aborted; and 15 miscarried). Additionally, many youth encountered violence: 41% reported violence in their dating relationships and 14% indicated that someone tried to have sexual intercourse with them against their will (8% indicated the person succeeded).

Legal:

The youth in this study indicated considerable involvement in the criminal justice system. Forty-five percent (45%) had trouble with the law since they left care; 41% had spent some time in jail; 26% had formal charges filed against them and 7% (not including 3 additional youth in out-of-state prisons and not interviewed) were presently incarcerated in a state prison.

Preparedness for Independent Living:

Most youth had exposure to independent living training during their time in care (See Table I).

Assistance for independence or services after foster youth turn 18 is difficult to find or not available at all.

Table I.

Independent Living Services	% receiving
Job seeking	73
Housekeeping	72
Educational planning	71
Money management	67
Interpersonal skills	66
Food management	65
Community resources	61
Transportation	61
Housing	51
Job maintenance	59
Parenting skills	47
Legal skills	37

While most youth received training; few reported concrete assistance for independence (See Table II) and actual services upon discharge (See Table III). Almost a third of the youth reported not having a place to live upon discharge and 50% had \$250.00 or less when they exited. The majority of youth reported infrequent contact with their caseworker during the last year in care: 14% said they never saw their worker; while 51% stated that they were only visited between 1 to 5 times. Almost 20% indicated they saw their worker more than 10 times. A majority said they were not satisfied with the services they received to prepare them to live on their own (53%).

Table II.

Type of Assistance Provided	% Reported Receiving Assistance
Giving a name in case of emergency	39
Meeting to see if help is needed	38
Providing health insurance	36
Getting a job/interview	25
Giving \$\$ to assist with housing	16
Supplying health records	15
Holding a support group	6

Table III.

Upon discharge, did you have the following:	% Reported Having
A place to live	69
At least \$250.00	50
Portfolio of important papers	38
Pots and pans to set up household	28
A valid drivers license	27

Current Contact:

A majority of respondents reported contact with siblings (74%); relatives (63%); former foster parents (54%); grandparents (45%); birth mother (37%); group home staff (35%); birth father (30%) and previous caseworker (29%). Youth indicated that they had close or very close relationships with siblings (64%) and former foster parents (54%). Most youth reported having family (52%) or friends (58%) to rely on when they encounter problems.

Overall Adjustment and Indicators of Difficulties and Successes:

Since leaving foster care, close to half of the youth experienced situations indicative of an unsuccessful transition to independence: not having a place to live, being incarcerated or spending time in jail, failure to obtain regular employment; engaging in the illegal selling of drugs or prostitution, or being victimized (physically or sexually).

Multiple placements while in foster care were linked to several negative circumstances including an increased likelihood of: having trouble with the law; ending up in jail; ending up on the streets or being homeless; higher rates of pregnancy; and more violence in a dating relationship. Having fewer placements were linked to having a higher perceived support network. Another factor related to a difficult adjustment for these youth was education. Less education was linked to higher rates of pregnancy and the increased likelihood of being incarcerated.

On a positive note, this research appears to support the notion that the receipt of training and services increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. Youth receiving more training and services from DCFS staff were: less likely to have trouble with the law; more satisfied with their overall foster care experience; better prepared to live on their own; and more satisfied with their current living arrangements.

Conclusion

The data from this research clearly suggests that a significant proportion of youth exiting the foster care system in Clark County, Nevada face serious difficulty in transitioning to life on their own. This is not to suggest that all the young adults are doing poorly. Some are doing exceedingly well and as a whole the young adults exhibited a great deal of resiliency. The fact that almost 20% of the youth went on to obtain a high school degree since exiting foster care and that over 30% had or were attending some type of college, despite many of the obstacles they face, demonstrates this fact. However, an unacceptable number ended up living on the streets, lacked a place to live, were incarcerated, lacked enough money to meet their basic living expenses, experienced an early pregnancy, failed to maintain steady employment, and were either physically or sexually victimized.

The data also indicate that a sizeable number of youth were ill-prepared to live on their own. A third of departing youth reported not having a place to live, 62% indicated that no one met with them to discuss their exit from care, and 50% reported not having a minimum of \$250.00 when they left care. Clearly more needs to be done with this population. As a community we end up paying dearly for the failure to ensure that these youth are capable of making the difficult transition to life in the community. On a national level, Congress recently passed the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which offers important new help to young adult's transitioning from foster care.

Several **program and policy recommendations** are advanced (some of which DCFS is working on):

1. **The age of majority for foster care youth should be raised to age 21.** It is unrealistic for youth to be ready to completely live on their own at age 18. Youth engaged in high school or any type of post secondary education (including college, vocational training, trade or technical school, etc.) should voluntarily be allowed to stay in care. Opportunities should be made to integrate these youth into the community by having them actually transition into the community (i.e., obtain housing etc.) while still under the state's supervision. This important safety net is essential for this population.
2. **Nevada should extend Medicaid coverage to young people ages 18 to 21 who were in foster care on their 18th birthday.** Recently passed federal legislation allows for this coverage (and federal reimbursement).
3. **Funds should be set aside for room and board for young people ages 18 to 21 who have left foster care because they have reached the age of 18 and are having difficulty obtaining a place to live** (Title I of the Foster Care Independence Act allows for 30% of newly allocated federal funds to be used for this function).
4. **Specialized case management services are needed for all older foster care youth** to ensure they have a realistic plan of action to live on their own.
5. **Youth leaving care should be given a portfolio of important documents** such as their health records, social security cards, etc., and a list of resources they can access.
6. **Specific after care services** (including case management and crisis intervention) **should be made available for former foster care youth.**

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ISSUE BRIEF UPDATE

This is the second in a series of Nevada KIDS COUNT Issue Briefs. Each of these publications will feature a specific topic related to child well-being. We sincerely appreciate the efforts of Nevada KIDS COUNT Advisory Council member, Dr. Thom Reilly, for providing us with this research overview.

If you need more specific information about the children and youth in your local area, contact Nevada KIDS COUNT, **Marlys Morton, Coordinator**

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