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Are foster youth prepared for adulthood? A phenomenological study of the effectiveness of the foster care system on preparing wards of the state for adulthood.

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine whether the resources provided to foster children before leaving the system are adequate to prepare them for lifetime achievement. The Independent Living Program established in 1985 and the F John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program established under the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 provided resources and funding for foster youth to prepare for adulthood. Despite these programs, studies have shown that foster youth are not as prepared to enter adulthood as their non-foster youth counterparts. Case workers are the point of contact for foster youths and may be unaware of the programs available. Additionally, foster youth report minimal to no contact with their case workers during the year before aging out of the system. Despite this lack of communication and participation in social services, about half of the foster youth surveyed reported feeling that they had lived a successful life.

1. Introduction

"My sweet sixteen did not include candles or a birthday cake. Instead, I got a one-way ticket into foster care. It was a trip that included being institutionalized twice, two group homes, two foster homes, and a four-hour stay in juvenile detention. I wasn't a bad kid. I just wasn't wanted" (pers. conversation).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the foster care system on preparing those that age out of the system for adulthood and successful futures. The primary outcomes of this study including determining how successful former foster youth became, what career paths were chosen, and whether former foster youth felt they would be better off had they received an

"exit strategy" upon leaving the system. Secondary outcomes included determining whether the programs offered to foster youth were being used.

1.1 Literature Review

Literature review included online journal articles, non-profit and government websites, and book review. There was not sufficient information or availability in books; subsequently book review was excluded. Numerous public programs were found to assist foster youth aging out of the system. For example, state colleges in New Jersey are tuition-free for foster youth (pers. conversation) and every community college in California offers a foster youth liaison as part of the Foster Youth Success Initiative. Yet, data shows that less than 3% of those aging out of foster care will earn a college degree (National Foster Youth Institute).

The Title IV-E Independent Living Program was amended by Public Law 99-272 (Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985) to include section 477, which established the Independent Living Program to assist foster youth who would eventually age out of the system. This law came to be after several surveys conducted in the 1980's revealed that a significant number of homeless shelter users were recently discharged foster youth. The law was enacted to assist foster youth aging out of the system to transition to adulthood. States were required to create and implement independent living services. States had the option of serving individuals up to the age of 21 years in the Independent Living Program.

The F John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, part of the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 made improvements to the Independent Living Program. Under the FCIA, states were required to provide education, training, employment services, and financial support to those aging out of state care. Additionally, participation in the program began several years before high school graduation and continued, as needed, until young adults aging out of foster care established independence or turned 21 years old. The John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program provides

states with flexible funding to establish programs for foster youth between the ages of 18 and 21 to obtain a high school diploma, career exploration, vocational job training, job placement and retention services, daily independent living skills, budget and financial management skills, substance abuse prevention, and preventative health programs. Additionally, this program provided for personal and emotion support through mentors and positive interactions with dedicated adults.

Despite these laws, statistics indicate that foster youth are not as well prepared to enter adulthood as their non-foster counterparts. A 2007 study conducted by Courtney, et al. (Midwest Study) found that foster youth were less likely to have a high school diploma, less likely to pursue higher education, less likely to earn a living wage, more likely to experience economic hardship, more likely to have a child out of wedlock, and more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. The Midwest Study included 732 foster youth from Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. The authors state "[w]e believe that our findings illustrate the inadequacy of current efforts to prepare young people in state care for a successful transition to adulthood." Most of the respondents in the study reported "not very" to "somewhat" prepared for self-sufficiency when exiting foster care. According to the study only a third used the services provided under the John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Thirty-nine percent of the participants did not receive services. While the study suggested a few reasons, the primary conclusion of the authors was lack of access.

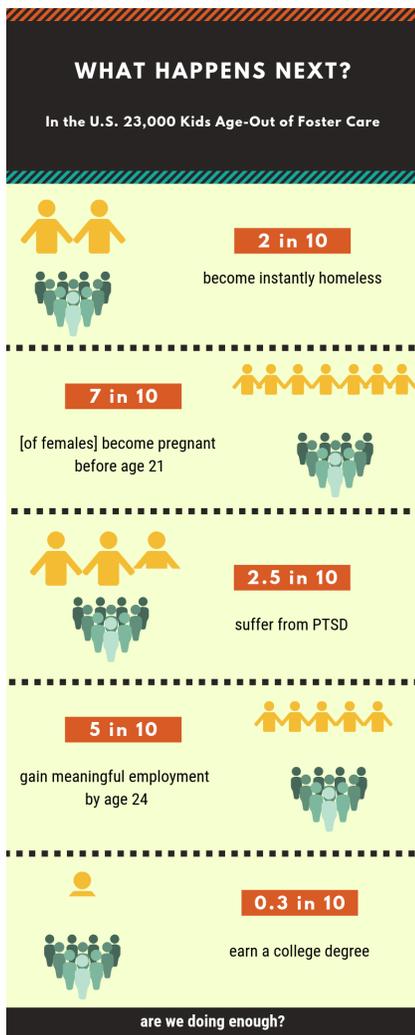
In a separate study by Thom Reilly (Reilly) conducted in Nevada, the author found that 15 years after the Foster Care Independence Act, "programs ... remain elusive" to kids aging out of the system. He found that foster youth experienced higher rates of homelessness, poverty, incarceration, early pregnancy, and unstable employment. This study identified 239 former foster youth. Of those 105 were located. Of those, five were deceased due to gang violence (n=3), drug overdose (n=1), and lack of appropriate medical care (n=1). Results of this study showed that 41% of former foster youth did not make enough money to cover basic living expenses, 24% dealt drugs, and 11% had sex for money to

make up the difference. While only 7% of the participants were incarcerated at the time of the study, 45% reported being in the criminal justice system since aging out of state care, 41% had been in jail, and 26% had formal charges pending. Over a third did not have a place to live and 50% had less than \$250 upon aging out of the foster care. Research and results of this study support that receiving training and services increases the likelihood of successful outcomes. Case workers are responsible for disseminating information about available independent living programs for foster youth. Sadly, 51% of foster youth indicated that their case worker visited them between one and four times during their last year in foster care and 14% reported never receiving a visit.

In another study conducted by Mason, et al., foster youth scored 15-20 percentile points below non-foster youth on statewide achievement tests. Only 59% of foster youth enrolled in eleventh grade graduated from high school, compared to 86% of non-foster youth. His study reported that foster youth are two-times more likely to repeat a grade, change schools mid-year, or enroll in special education.

The primary purpose of foster care is to provide a safe and stable environment for a child that cannot be with his or her parents for some reason – an environment that feels like home (Adoption.org). Children are placed in foster care due to abuse, neglect, illness [of a parent], death, drug abuse, child's choice, and parent surrender. As for child's choice, the "choices" include child breaks the law, truancy, runs away, or court ordered for child safety. According to recent statistics, the demographics of foster youth are 52% males, 48% females, 44% white, 23% African American, 10% other/multiracial, 10% Latino, and 2% undetermined (National Foster Youth Institute).

One non-profit organization that specifically addresses adults previously in foster care, the Foster Care Alumni of America, was identified. According to their website: "[a]s a community of alumni, we want to ensure that others from foster care can experience the same traditions, opportunities, and love that most people get from their families. That is why Foster Care Alumni of America chapters



around the country plan alumni reunions—"family" barbeques or holiday events—to claim these family traditions as our own." The founder, Misty Stenslie, received the Thomas F. Tonniges, MD, FAAP Lifetime Achievement Award for Advocacy on Behalf of Vulnerable Children.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

Despite regulations that require states to provide services to foster youth aging out of state care, the research shows those programs are working but falling short. Most of the research focuses on former foster youth aged 18 to 25 years old. Those foster youth that are now 40 to 50 years old either aged out of the system after the Independent Living Initiative of 1986 was passed or while it was still in its infancy. To analyze whether that legislation is having an impact, it is important to determine what former foster youth did that either did not participate in the new programs or aged out of foster care prior to the initiative (see Figure 1: Are we doing enough?). Do these new

Figure 1: Are we doing enough?

regulations make a difference in the long run? The Midwest Study showed that even though foster youth were at a disadvantage when compared with those not in foster care, foster youth remained very optimistic (55.2%) or fairly optimistic (32.8%) about their futures. Is optimism enough? Who is falling

through the cracks? What should be done? And who should decide or provide input to what should be done?

2. Methodology

This study was conducted in three phases. Phase one was a general survey targeting individuals between 40 and 60 years old. Survey Monkey was used to keep responses confidential. The survey was posted using social media, specifically, Facebook. That post was shared four times. Fifteen individuals completed the survey, three of those responses were from individuals under the age of 40.

The second phase included personal interviews, with a target of five to seven individuals previously in foster care (Addendum A). Emails and private messages were sent to five individuals; however, only three completed the interview questions. Follow-up emails and messages to the remaining respondents were never returned. None of the respondents wanted in person or over the phone interviews. All interview participants were fully aware of the purpose of the study and had a chance to review the questions and to remain anonymous. Privacy was to be protected by changing names and removing any identifying markers, for example city and state.

The third phase was researching before, during, and after the surveys and interviews to fill in the gaps and glean information from other sources sparked by survey and interview responses. Research included discussions with social services and literature and journal review. Keywords were used to search Google Scholar for relevant literature, journal articles, legislation, non-profit organizations, and civic organizations targeting foster youth.

3. Results

The majority of respondents were in foster care between three and six years, moving two to three times. Parent surrender (n=6), followed by physical abuse (n=4), emotional abuse (n=2), and sexual abuse (n=2) were cited as the reasons for being in foster care. Only one respondent received counseling prior to aging out of the system. Of the 15 respondents only four of those who aged out of

the system attended college, one became pregnant but managed to graduate from high school, one was sent to a homeless shelter, one to grandparents to finish high school, one got married, two began working, and one joined the military. The others were adopted and thus not considered to have aged out of the system.

Interestingly, most of the respondents currently work or retired from social service-oriented careers, such as social work, elder care, domestic abuse counseling, home health care, and one was a certified nursing assistant. Other careers included heavy machine operator, cashier, sales, project manager, retired (by choice), and unemployed. The majority of respondents have had between two and seven different careers. About half of the respondents considered themselves successful. The other half did not. Of the reasons cited, those included living paycheck to paycheck, unable to retire, difficulty holding a job, poor life skills, no coping skills, and falling below the poverty line. One respondent reported having survived sexual, physical, and emotional abuse from biological parents, foster parents, and adopted parents.

The survey allowed only one response per question. More than half of the respondents were frustrated they were unable to select more than one reason for being in foster care. Yet, given the one-response limit, most selected parent surrender. Even though many of the respondents experienced other forms of abuse, parent surrender was the reason they believed they were in foster care.

"Ty," "Shannon," and "Julie" responded to the interview questions. Ty entered foster care at age 12, two years after his mother died. His stepfather raised him and his two sisters during the two years between his mother's death and entering foster care. He was physically and sexually abused by his stepfather. He remained in foster care until age 19 and lived in "about 200 homes." He stated that every time the foster family wanted to go on vacation he was moved to another home. He was separated from both of his sisters upon entering the system and never lived with them again. He said that he rarely unpacked the one bag he was allowed to have. He often had to leave things behind when he moved. He

rarely made friends, felt behind in school, and graduated late (age 19). After foster care, he joined the military, but he was discharged on hardship. He stated the reason was his only living relative died. He did not disclose he has since reunited with his biological sisters. He attributes the success he has achieved to his wife, who is a counselor. He has been married to her since his late 20's and has two children. Before aging out of the system the only skills he admits to having are cleaning and cooking. He never had a job until after leaving foster care. He had no money and received no mental health counseling.

Several events led up to Shannon's placement in foster care. She stated that her mother did not want her, nor have time to be a parent. At one point her mother pressed charges against her for destruction of property, and Shannon was placed in a juvenile detention center. Later she became pregnant. Her mom stopped bringing food into the house and refused to seek medical care for her. Shannon lost 13 lbs. during her first trimester. She and her mother got into a fight and Shannon struck her mother. Her mother again pressed charges and Shannon was placed in juvenile detention. Department of Social Services took custody of Shannon and had her released to a children's group home. She had her baby at 17 and at 18 petitioned the court to be released from foster care. She was a senior in high school. Shannon stated, "I'm grateful now as an adult that I was shown another way of life and realized how dysfunctional my home life had really been." She also noted in her interview that her mother had her biological sister admitted to a mental facility because her sister was "destroying [her mother's] marriage."

Julie entered foster care at age 16 after her parents surrendered parental rights. Initially, Julie was placed on a 72-hr. hold in a mental institution. Following, she was placed in a group home, but within 24 hours she returned to the mental institution for another 72-hr. hold. She returned to the same group home before being placed in a foster home. She said she was placed in the mental institution for being gravely disabled, or unable to care for herself, and the second time for threatening to commit

suicide. Five months after living in the first foster home, she ran away, and was later picked up and placed in juvenile detention before receiving placement in a second foster home. She was reunited with her biological parents at age 17 after graduating from high school. After high school she attended community college and later graduated with a bachelor's degree in biology and master's degree in English. She attributes her educational achievements to her grandparents who had established a college fund. She saw her case worker "less than six times" after entering foster care and did not receive any exit counseling. She did not age out of the system as she was reunited with her biological parents. She said that in the summer before going to college, she learned to drive, got a job, and bought a car. She maintains a civil relationship with her parents.

The social worker wished to remain anonymous. She indicated that all of the children in foster care in her jurisdiction received a physical upon entering and exiting the system. Anytime sexual abuse was suspected a special unit completed the intake. The special unit included a representative from the prosecutor's office, a police officer, doctor, and nurse. Due to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, foster youth were pushed into permanent placement after spending 15 of the previous 24 months in state care, whether that was in a permanent foster home, adoption, with a family member, or mother and/or father. According to literature 51% were reunited with parent(s), 23% adopted, 8% emancipated, 10% went to live with a guardian, 7% another relative, and 2% other outcomes (another agency, run away, death) (Foster Care Statistics 2016).

In her jurisdiction, foster youth aged out of the system at 18 or upon graduation only if graduation was the same year that they turned 18. For example, a foster youth with a January birthday was permitted to stay in foster care until graduating in May/June of the same year. If graduation was not imminent, those kids were aged out upon turning 18, often without a high school diploma. She noted that those that aged out, as opposed to being adopted or finding permanent placement, found it harder to maintain stability, find a good job, or stable housing. When asked about what changes she

would implement, almost all her recommended changes were for those aging out of the system. Those included mandatory mental health screening and ongoing counseling, aging out programs that included housing, case management, career counseling, job training, and life skills and financial planning courses.

4. Summary

Foster care can result in lifetime impacts on the very kids the system seeks to protect. Unfortunately, not everyone grows up with their biological parents. Often kids are surrendered into foster care by their parents or child protective services (CPS) removes kids from their home due to unsafe living conditions, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, or other reasons. Foster youth are considered wards of the court. Their tenure of care ends at 18 or upon graduation from high school with few exceptions. For example, foster youth in Illinois can remain in foster care until age 21 and in some states foster youth can remain in foster care until high school graduation even if that is at age 19.

Most of these kids do not have the resources to go to college or the life skills necessary to get a job, rent an apartment, pay bills, or anything else adults are expected to do. Studies have shown that often foster youth have never had a job before aging out of the system. While programs exist today that offer skills training, financial assistance, and educational resources, only about a third are taking advantage of those opportunities. In the interview with the social worker, she advocated for programs for foster youth aging out of the system. Those programs are provided under the Foster Care

Independence Act of 1999 and the John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Figure 2: Service Programs for Foster Youth Aging Out of the System). If case workers are the point of contact for foster youth and they are

unaware of the programs to assist those aging out of the system, how are foster youth going to find out about the programs?

Agencies have been talking about the issue since the early 1980's, yet little has actually been done. Case workers remain unaware of all of the services

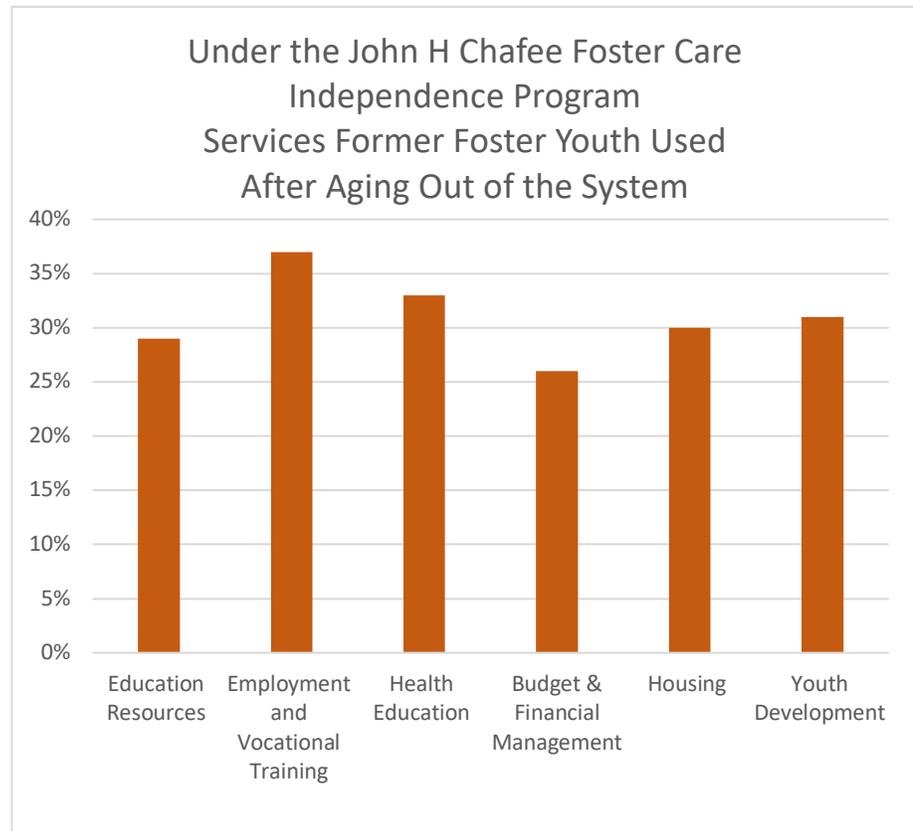


Figure 2: Service Programs for Foster Youth Aging Out of the System. Courtney, et al.

available. Of the people that participated in the survey and interviews, about half are satisfied and feel successful despite the fact that only one respondent received exit-counseling and none of the respondents received any assistance acclimating into adulthood.

Limitations of this study include very small sample size, inability to locate previous foster youth who are currently incarcerated or have deceased, and lack of time to delve into the current social services programming for foster youth aging out of the system.

Even though only one respondent received counseling before aging out of the system, half of the respondents reported having lived successful lives. Of those that did not, the reasons included insufficient income, poor life and coping skills, and inability to hold a job. Results of this

phenomenological study indicate that communication is lacking between case workers and their subjects, especially the year proceeding aging out of the system. Of the respondents, none were aware of the resources available.

Future studies should include participants recruited from jails, prisons, and half-way houses as well as the general population. Additionally, name searches should be cross-referenced with social service agencies to find those that have passed and determine the cause of and age at death. A control group should also be evaluated taking into consideration similar demographics between the two groups. This would determine whether a 50% satisfaction with lifetime achievement is consistent between foster and non-foster youth. The Midwest Study compared foster youth to a control group; however, the authors contend that the demographics may have been too different to draw true comparisons. It is worth studying whether parent surrender leads to success or failure of former foster youth as opposed to other reasons for entering the system. Finally, research should determine how the funds received from the John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program are spent and evaluate their effectiveness on preparing foster youth for adulthood.

Addendum A

Interview Questions for Foster Youth

1. What was your experience like in foster care? Include any information such as what moving was like, what living with strangers was like, what your foster parents were like, how you felt, etc.
2. Did you feel like you were prepared to age-out of foster care? Why or why not?
3. Why were you in foster care (share only if you feel comfortable doing so)? How did that make you feel then and how does that make you feel now?
4. What were your dreams as a child? When you were little, what did you want to be when you grew up? Do you feel that those dreams were attainable being in foster care?
5. Looking back, is there a way you could have been better prepared to be an adult and achieve your version of success or attain those childhood dreams?
6. Please write in the name you would like me to use with your responses. This can be your actual 1st name or one that you like better :)
7. If you have any questions for me, please write those here.

Interview Questions for Case Worker

1. I would be interested to know the process of “checking in” and “checking out” of foster care. You mentioned that kids will get a physical, anything else?
2. Are there requirements for being in foster care? For example, I was required to go to psychotherapy.
3. Please reflect over the data. I included both the raw data and the charts. Keep in mind that most respondents are 20 to 30 years out of the system. What are your comments?
4. If you were in charge of revamping up the system, what changes would you make?

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