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Study Title: *Aging Out of Foster Care: The Initial Transition Experience*

Term of IRB Approval: August 3, 2010 – August 2, 2011

Study Completed: August 2, 2011

Summary or Abstract:

This study is a two-year pilot project designed to provide child welfare professionals, judges, researchers, advocates, and policy-makers with an understanding of how youth aging out of the foster care system experience their first year of independence. Partnering with the public child welfare local agencies, the GMU researchers used de-identified OASIS data on foster children aging out of the system to identify potential study participants and obtain information on the youth's characteristics while in foster care (e.g., age coming into foster care, number of placements). The GMU researchers conducted monthly semi-structured interviews with 19 youth (ages 18-21) through the first year after leaving foster care and the child welfare system (18 other youth were lost to follow-up). The youth, who aged out of foster care system between February 2009 and January 2010, came from Arlington, Fairfax, and Loudoun counties and City of Alexandria. Participants received gift cards as incentives to participate.

Major findings were:

- 12 of 19 youth were female. The majority were non-White. Seven of 19 youth were involved in childbearing or parenting: four females had children, one female terminated a pregnancy, four males were expectant fathers. All were currently single, not married.
- Most youth had entered the foster care system as teenagers, mostly due to neglect, the child's behavior, or parental alcohol abuse. Ten left the child care system at age 21; the other nine left between the ages of 18 and 20. The number of placements ranged from 2 to 11, with the median at 2-4 placements.
- Money (incl. financial debt), stable living arrangements, and employment were the top concerns. Youth cited being most successful in regards to educational attainment. The greatest challenge was lack of employment. Most had relationships with at least one adult. Most had adequate housing, but it was typically unstable.
- On average, youth made 1-3 housing changes during their first year. Two-thirds of youth planned initially to return to their biological family's home. Often these became short, sporadic stays. For those who planned a return home, most had positive experiences. For those who had no alternative to home, most experienced later conflict with family that required intervention.
- Two-thirds of youth were unemployed at some point in time. Most transitioned in and out of jobs. On average, youth made 1-2 job changes during that year. Due to low pay, youth felt the need to work at multiple jobs or supplement job income from other sources.

- 55-60% of youth were enrolled in school (e.g., college, community college, high school/GED). Very few enrolled in vocational education. 28% dropped out of school for non-academic reasons.
- Few maintained contact with their foster families. However, most maintained contact with their biological families, especially with their siblings. One-third maintained contact with a social worker through the first quarter, after which contact dropped off dramatically. Youth turned to other sources (e.g., other relatives, friends, teachers) for social support.
- Several youth were making strides toward becoming self-sufficient and independent: two-thirds were either employed or enrolled in school, two-thirds were managing without government benefits, and eight were living independently. Despite the challenges, most youth expressed hope for the future, specifically, in terms of having careers, houses, and families.
- When asked, youth mentioned that they wished the agency could have continued to provide assistance, including services related to employment, medical care/insurance, housing, and tuition. Regular support and contact with the social worker was also mentioned.
- Those youth at risk for poor outcomes were more likely to be African-American, have entered the foster care system prior to age 14, had four or more placements (incl. one or more institutional placements) during foster care, and been involved with the justice system at the time of transition. Those youth with better outcomes tend to be employed at the time of transition and stayed in foster care up until age 21.

Some of the limitations of the study include the small study sample, which limits the generalizability of the research findings, and the possibility of a self-selection bias.

Copy of PowerPoint presentation at:

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/chssweb/documents/9094/original/ROME-Aging-Out-Of-Foster-Care-PPT.pdf?1342102212>.

Copy of the 2012 interview with Sunny Harris Rome at: <http://cochrane.gmu.edu/articles/4186>.