

Aging Out of Foster Care: The Initial Transition Experience

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Study Rationale

- Youth aging out of foster care face negative long-term outcomes
- The literature fails to address how, when, and why these youth find themselves on a downward trajectory
- Virginia ranked last among all states in reunification of foster children
- Northern VA has one of the highest housing costs in the nation

Research Questions

- What patterns can be discerned regarding when, why, and how transitioning youth experience adverse events?
- What progress toward self-sufficiency are former foster youth able to make during the transitional year?
- In which domains are they most successful? In which do they face the greatest challenges?
- How do their current experiences differ depending on their demographic characteristics and what we know about their foster care experiences?
- Is the first year after leaving care a critical one for youth aging out?

Study Purpose

- To identify potential supports that will promote greater stability for youth aging out of foster care and positive outcomes in the following domains:
 - Housing
 - Employment
 - Education
 - Relationships

Methodology

- 2-year qualitative pilot study in 4 Northern VA counties
- Consenting youth who aged out between Feb. 1, 2009 and January 31, 2010
- Background data retrieved from OASIS
- Semi-structured interviews with each youth, monthly, over the course of 1 year
- Gift cards
- Quarterly meetings with Advisory Panel

Methodology: Advantages

- Frequency and format:
 - Ongoing relationship between participants and researchers
 - More detail divulged, including sensitive issues
 - Captured small changes over time
 - Contributed to participant retention
- Agency collaboration:
 - Assistance locating youth who were MIA
 - Ongoing feedback on study process & timely problem-solving

Methodology: Challenges & Limitations

- Challenges
 - Time, labor and cost-intensive
 - Inconsistent recruitment by workers
 - Ethical dilemmas
- Limitations
 - Small numbers, resulting in limited generalizability
 - Self-selection, resulting in potentially skewed sample

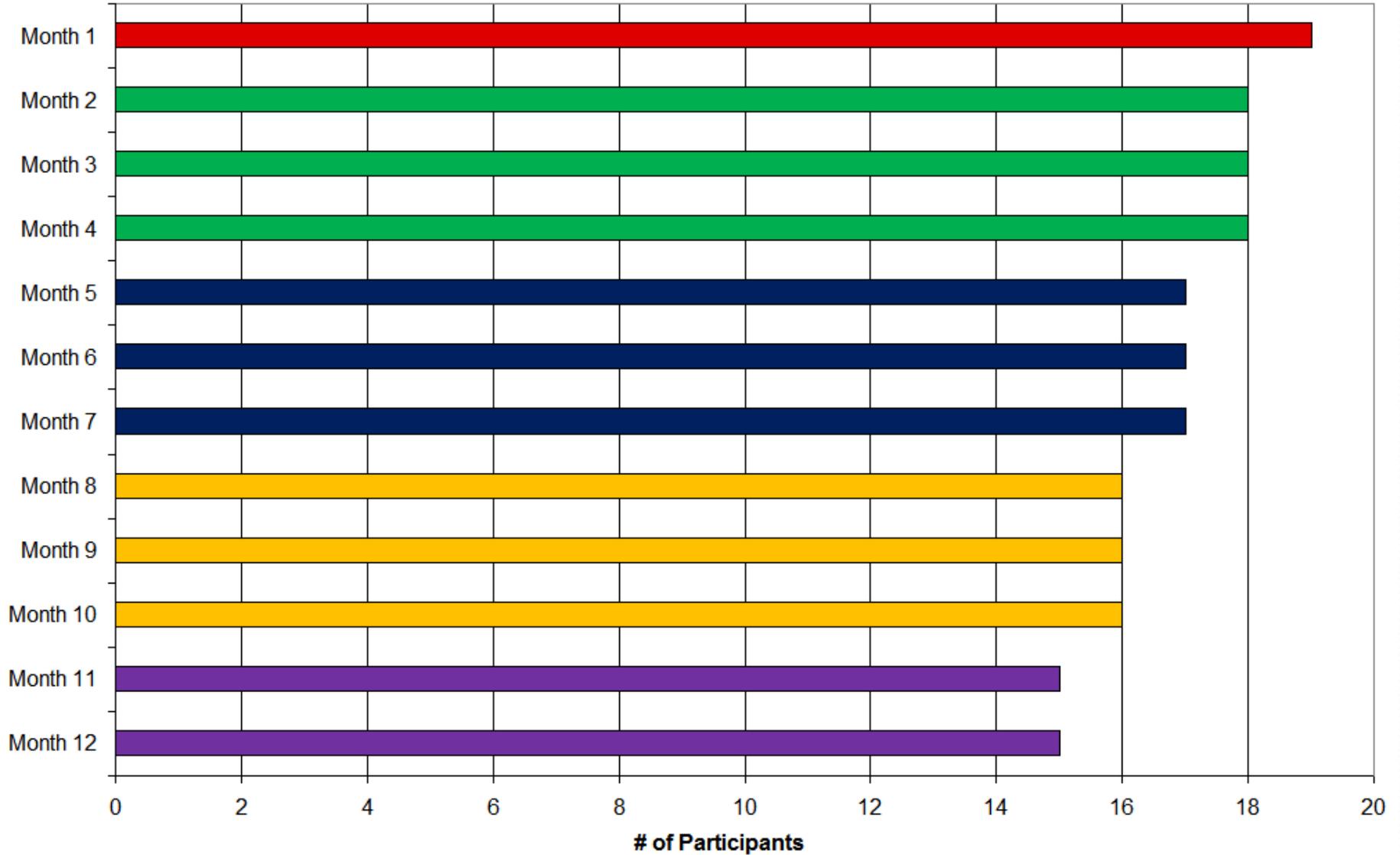
Methodology: Participant Views

- Overwhelmingly positive:
 - Approved of the one-year timeframe
 - Approved of the monthly interval
 - Approved of the amount and selection of gift cards

Participants

- 19 initial participants, 18 inactive cases
- 7 male, 12 female
- 7 African American, 8 Hispanic, 2 white, 1 American Indian, 1 mixed race
- All single
- 4 had children, 1 terminated a pregnancy, 2 expectant fathers
- All but 2 first entered care as teenagers
- Most entered care due to neglect, child's behavior, parent's alcohol abuse
- Total number of placements ranged from 2 to 11, with most at the lower end (2-4)
- 10 left care at age 21; 9 left at 18, 19, or 20

Length of Participation



Housing

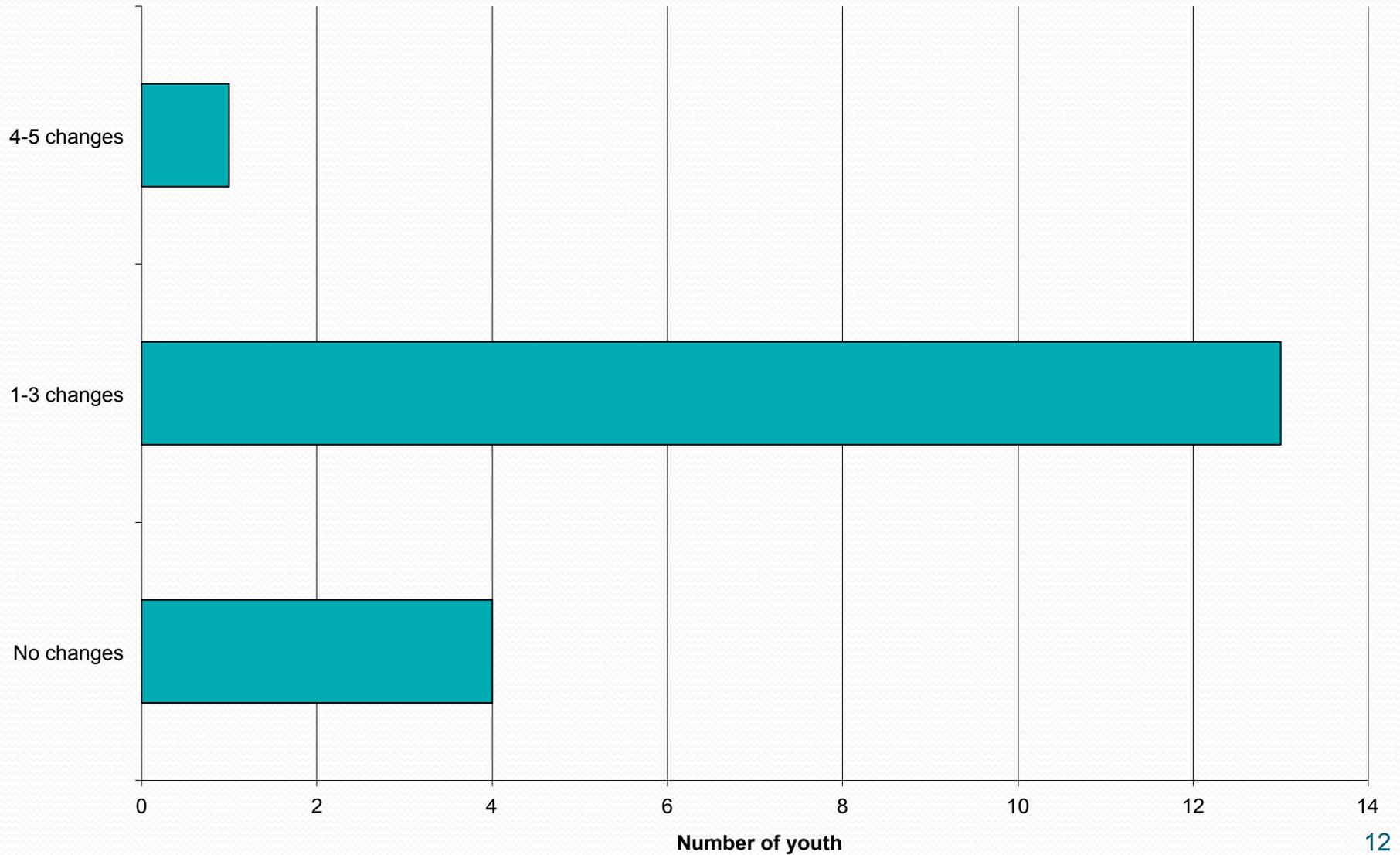
Initial Housing Arrangement

- 7 with biological family
- 6 independent
- 2 with foster family
- 1 with godparent
- 1 in college dorm
- 1 with friends

Final Housing Arrangement

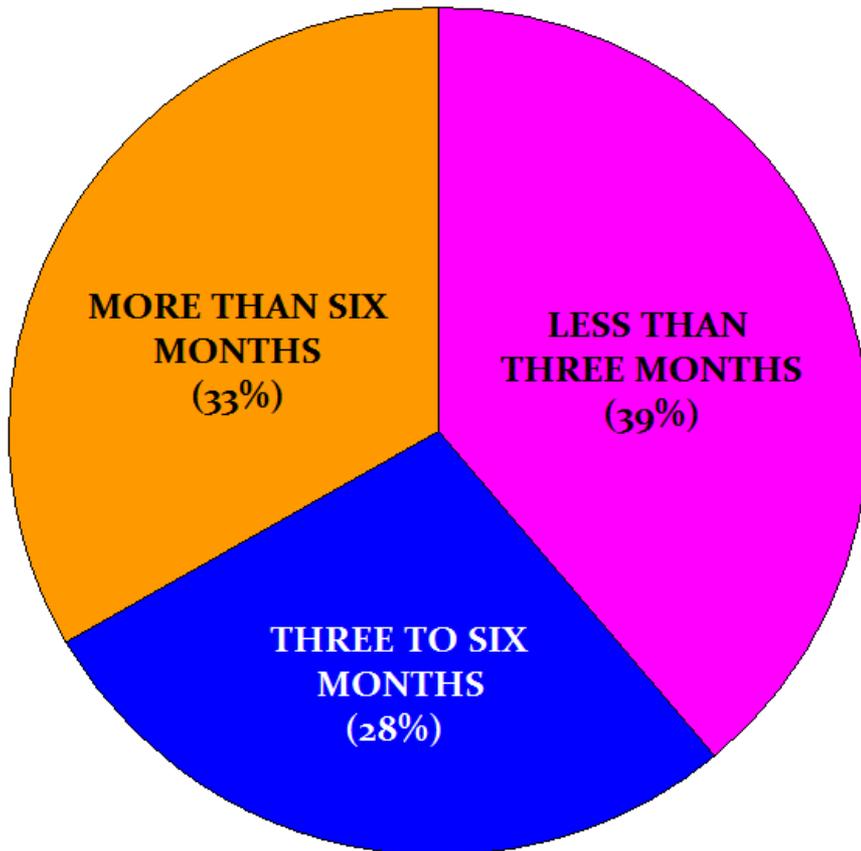
- 5 with biological family
- 8 independent
- 2 with foster family
- 1 in homeless shelter
- 1 in college dorm
- 1 with friend

Number of Housing Changes



Housing (cont' d)

Time in Initial Housing Arrangement



Of those who moved within the first quarter, reasons included:

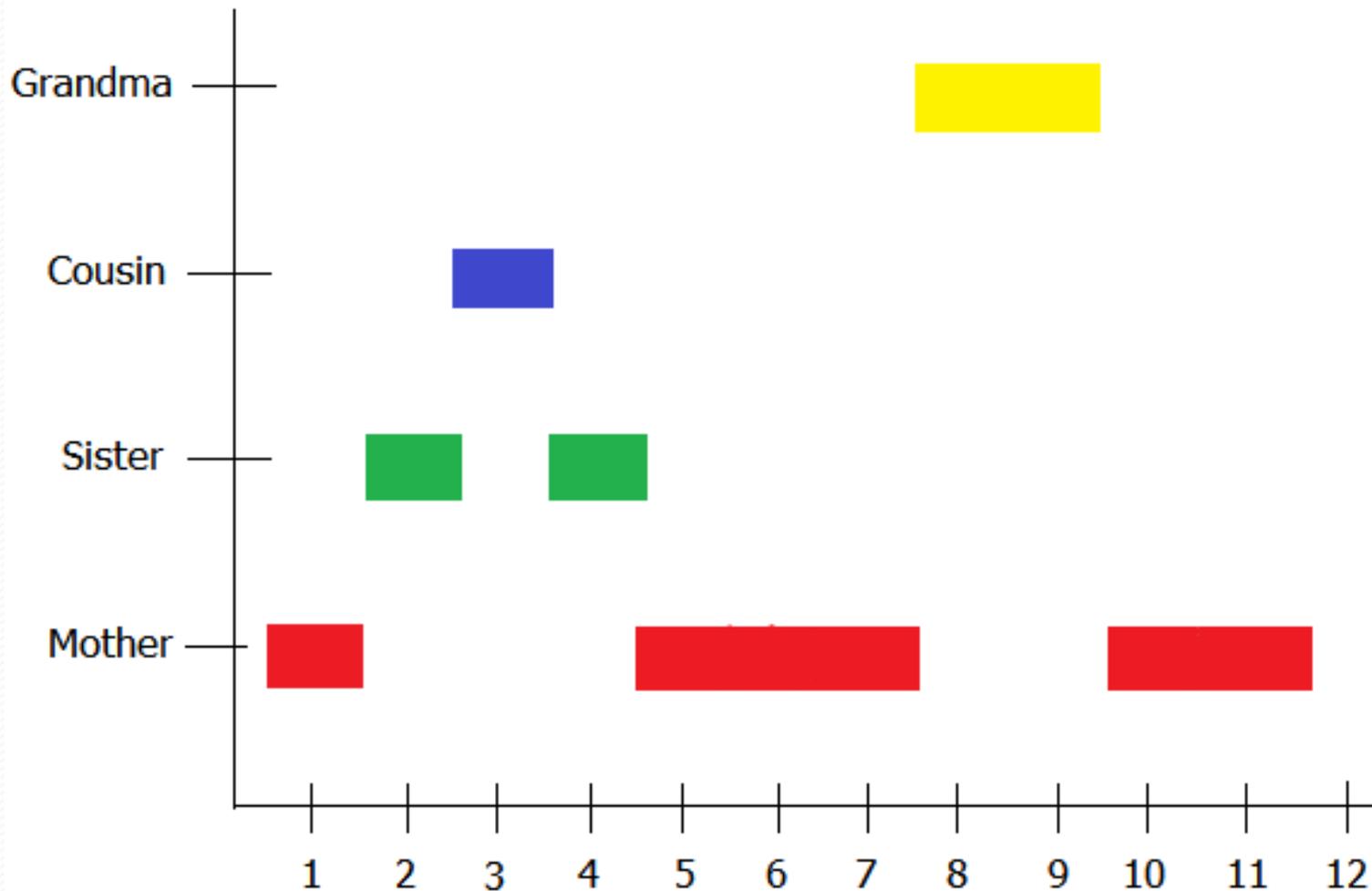
- Conflicts/altercations with others in household
- Lease ending
- Displaced/no room
- Convenience

Returning to Bio Family

N=7

- For 2/3, returning home was the plan
- For majority, arrangement was short-lived (1 month or less)
- Some returned home to be with family, some felt they had no alternative, and some mentioned both
- Those who returned home to be with family had positive experiences; those who felt they had no choice experienced conflict requiring police intervention
- 2/3 said they would NOT go home if they had it to do over again

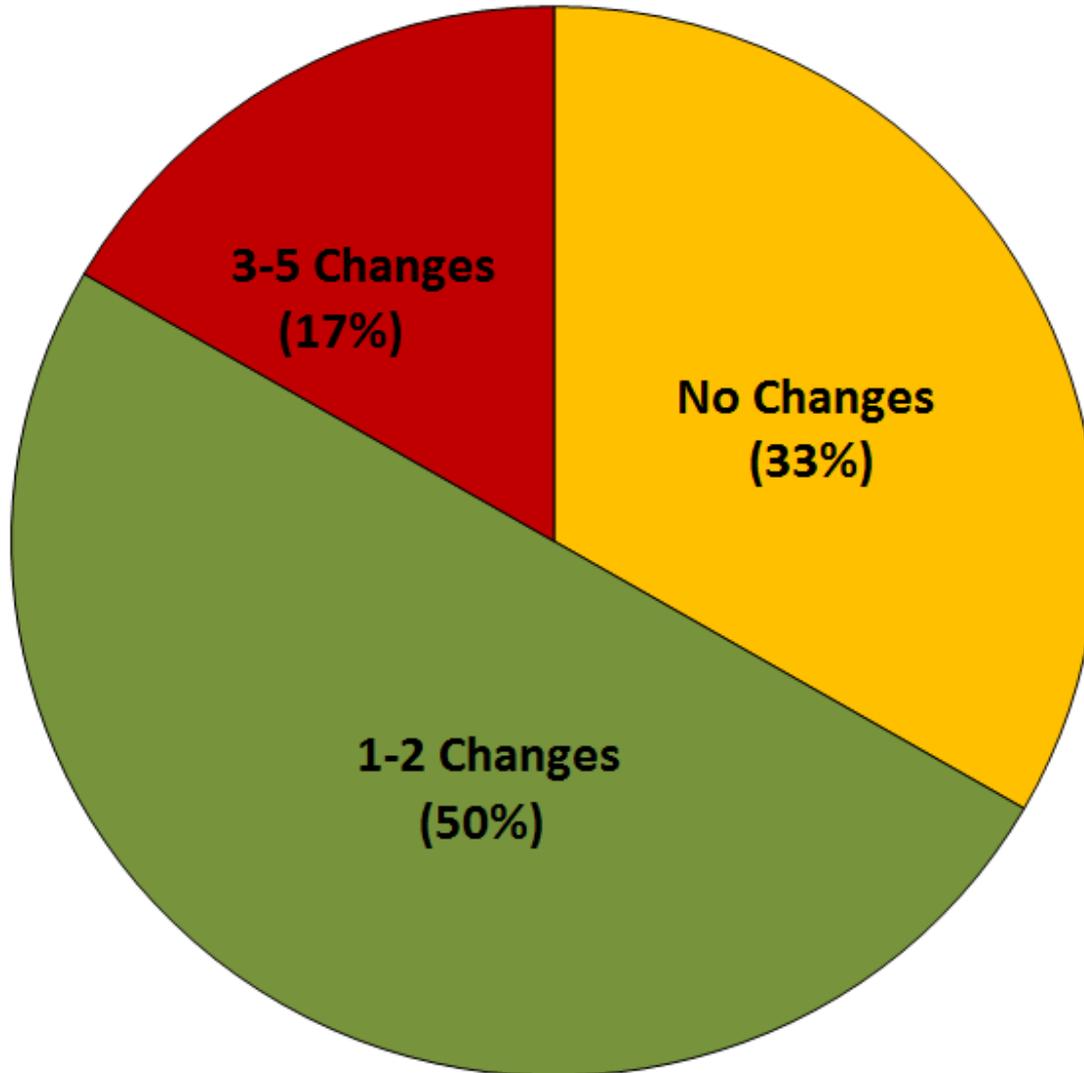
Returning to Bio Family (cont' d)



Employment

- In every quarter: 2/3 employed and 1/3 not employed
- 2/3 unemployed at some point in time
- 6 youth had periods of unemployment lasting 3 months or more; 3 were unemployed for virtually entire year
- 2/3 moved in and out of employment
- Types of jobs: model, nursing assistant, handyman

Number of Job Changes



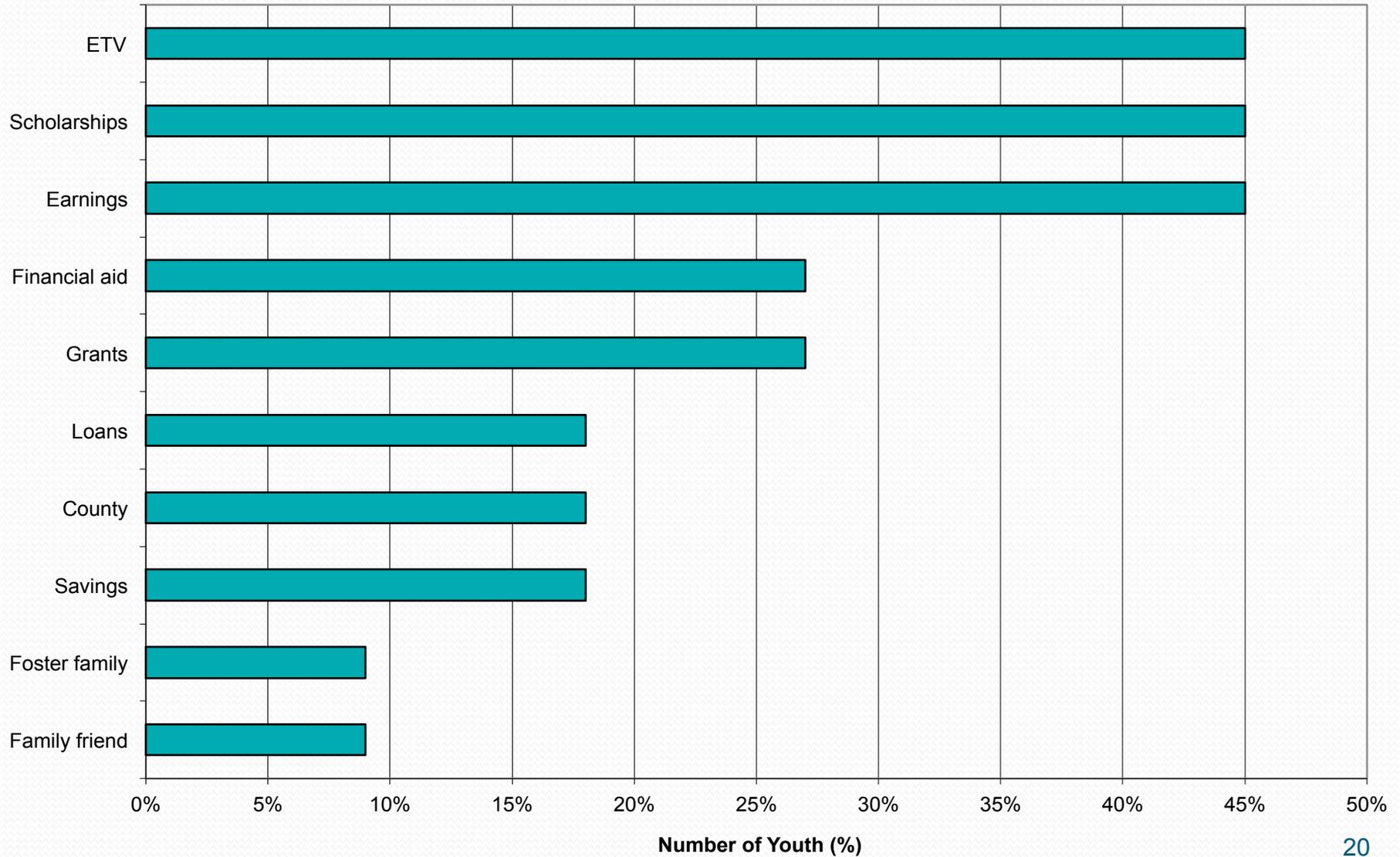
Employment (cont' d)

- Only 1 or 2 earned \$12.75/hour or more; average hourly wage = \$9.48.
- Most worked part-time (less than 35 hours/week)
- Most combined 2-3 sources to meet expenses
- This included: earnings (33%), help from family (16%), unemployment insurance (11%); others relied on tax refunds, savings, loans, friends, TANF, and county subsidies.

Education

- In each quarter, 55-60% were enrolled in school
 - 35-45% were in 4-year colleges or Universities; 1 youth continued on to graduate school
 - 18-45% enrolled in community college
 - 11-27% enrolled in HS or GED
 - Very few attended vocational programs
- 84-93% reported having specific educational goals
- 28% dropped out, all for non-academic reasons; 28% were never enrolled

How did they Finance their Education?

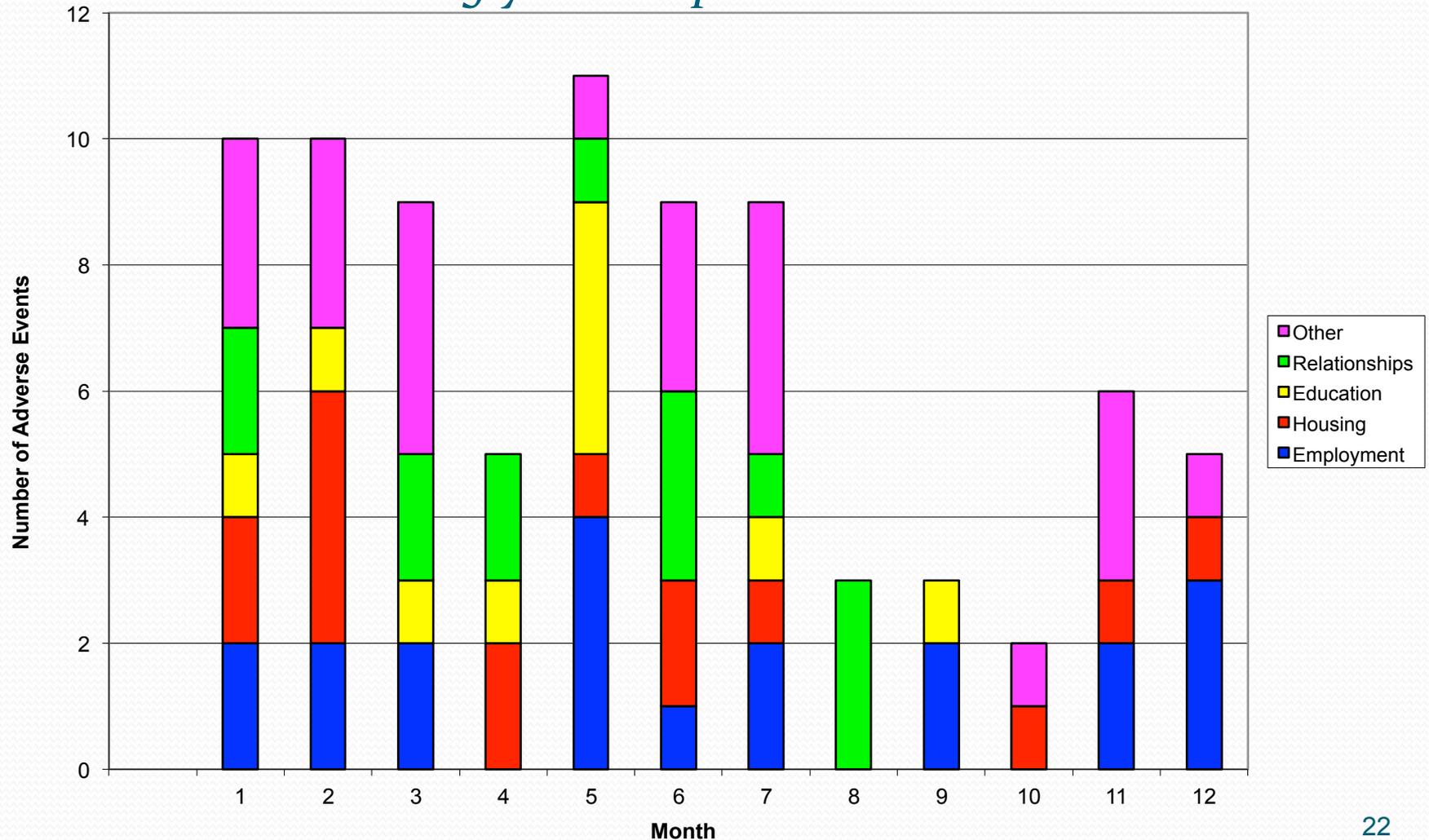


Relationships

- Much more likely to maintain contact with biological parents than with foster families or social workers
- 2/3 to 3/4 maintained frequent contact with biological siblings
- 1/3 maintained contact with social worker during the first quarter; number dropped precipitously thereafter
- Most helpful/Turn to: other relatives, teachers, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, family friends, step-parents, church acquaintances
- Found their own informal mentors to rely on; none found officially designated mentors to be helpful
- Some indicated having no adult to turn to in time of need

Research Question #1:

What patterns can be discerned regarding when, why, and how transitioning youth experience adverse events?



Question #1 (cont'd)

- Despite adverse events, half the youth reported NOT having experienced any crises in the course of the study
- Expressed pride in: educational achievements, being independent/responsible, avoiding pregnancy, surviving
- All had positive visions for the future

Research Question #2

What progress toward self-sufficiency are former foster youth able to make the transitional year?

- One was meeting all financial obligations without assistance
- Eight were living independently
- Two-thirds were either working or in school
- Two-thirds were managing without government benefits (unemployment insurance, TANF, housing assistance, or county stipend)
- One was living in a shelter, two at risk; remainder stable

Question #2 (cont 'd)

Asked to reflect on how their foster care experience influenced their progress toward independence (N=16):

- 75% viewed it as positive
- 25% viewed it as negative

Thought agency could have better prepared them by:

- starting independent living services sooner
- allowing youth to move to independence more gradually
- teaching budgeting skills,
- requiring forced savings
- providing career exploration

Research Question #3

In which domains are they most successful? In which do they face the greatest challenges?

Most successful in education

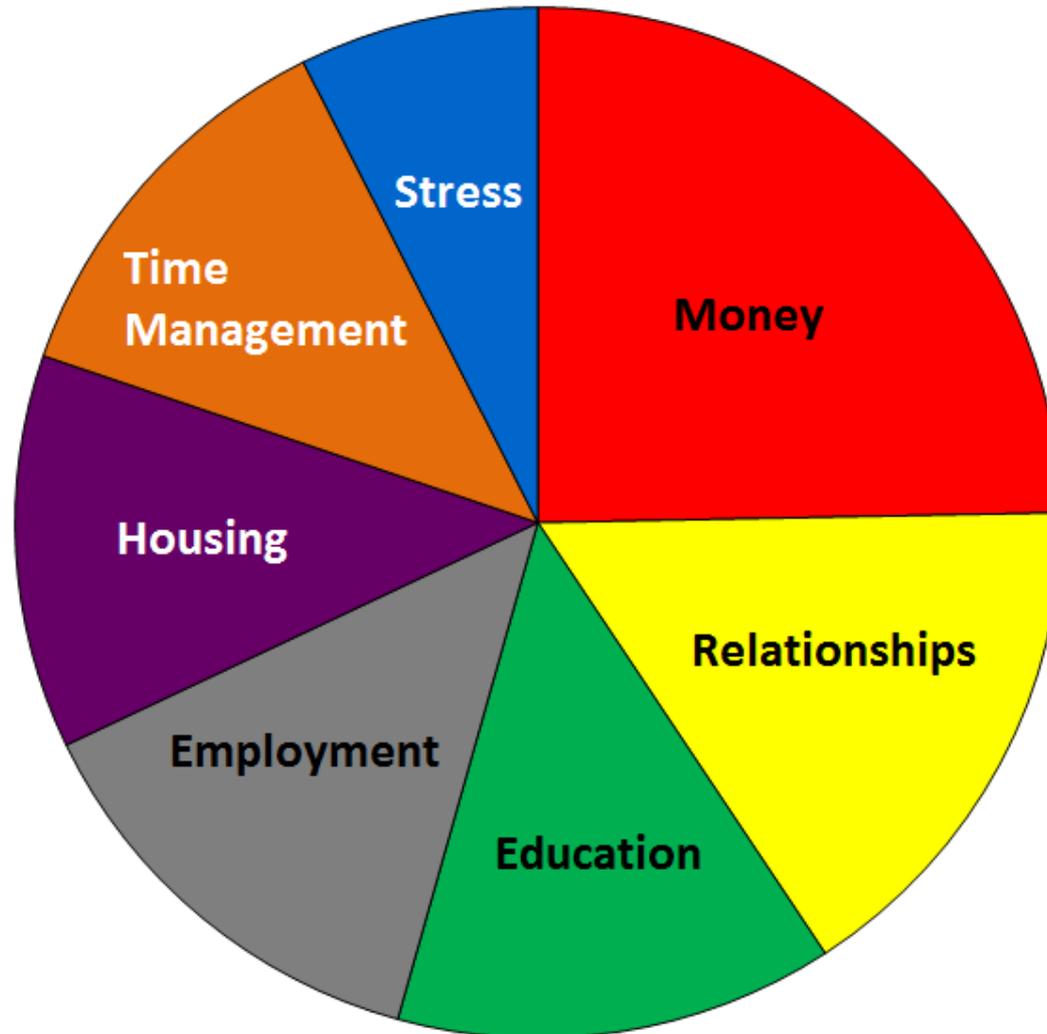
Greatest challenge was employment

Most had relationships with at least one adult, though allegiances shifted frequently

Most had adequate housing but often it was unstable

Question #3 (cont'd)

Participant Perceptions of Monthly Challenges



Question #3 (cont'd)

- Wished the agency could have continued to provide:
 - Employment/job skills/job search*
 - Medical care/health insurance
 - Housing/rental assistance*
 - Tuition
 - Independent living services
 - Financial advice
 - Financial assistance/monthly allowance*
 - Structure/support/regular worker contact

Research Question #4

How do their current experiences differ depending on their demographic characteristics and what we know about their foster care experiences?

Doing Well Across All Domains (N=8)

- 25% entered care at age 14 or younger
- 12% had 4 or more placements
- 13% are African American
- 50% are Hispanic

Clearly at Risk (N=3)

- 100% entered care at age 14 or younger
- 67% had 4 or more placements
- 100% are African American
- None are Hispanic

Question #4 (cont'd)

Doing Well/Relatively Well (N=11)

- 100% employed at time of transition
- 11% involved with justice system at time of transition
- 45% had 1 or more institutional placements while in care
- 64% stayed in care till age 21

At Risk/Somewhat at Risk (N=7)

- 57% employed at time of transition
- 43% involved with justice system at time of transition
- 86% had 1 or more institutional placements while in care
- 43% stayed in care till age 21

Research Question #5

Is the first year after leaving care a critical one for youth aging out?

Many youth were able to achieve stability, though not self-sufficiency

Protective factors include:

- Living with a stable adult who shares or pays the rent
- An adult who maintains a positive, active, and consistent presence in their lives
- Being a full-time student
- Receiving educational and housing subsidies
- Reliable means of transportation & communication
- Keeping the same job throughout the transitional year

Question #5 (cont 'd)

Risk factors include:

- Being on probation
- Accumulating fines
- Losing government benefits

Without further research, it is impossible to determine whether experience during the first year is predictive of longer-term outcomes

Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusion

- Both the child welfare and adult systems are limited in their ability to meet the needs of youth who have recently left care

Recommendations

- Develop creative models for targeting the unique needs of youth who are transitioning out of care
- Invest in research that targets the transitional year
- Invest in flexible benefits and services that support youth during the transitional year
- Engage a network of community-based providers in reaching out to transitioning youth

**CHILD WELFARE
SYSTEM**



**ADULT SERVICE
SYSTEM**

Conclusions & Recommendations (cont' d)

Conclusion

- Achieving self-sufficiency during the first year is unrealistic

Recommendations

- Develop exit plans that aim for stability, including reliance on trustworthy adults
- Provide support in navigating the existing system
- Ensure carryover of skills for daily living during the transitional year

Conclusions & Recommendations (cont' d)

Conclusion

- Protective factors can help position youth for stability at the end of the transitional year

Recommendations

- Provide job coaches during care who follow youth throughout the transitional period
- Extend eligibility for housing and educational support
- Provide assistance with the “little things”

Next Steps In Research

Goal: Effectuate positive outcomes for youth; reduce costs

- Build on the pilot study
 - Refine methodology
 - Expand domains to include health, mental health, criminal justice involvement, and friendships
 - Assess status of youth monthly for at least another year
 - Include jurisdictions from all regions of the state

Next Steps (cont' d)

- Conduct intervention research
 - Validate identified protective and risk factors
 - Test innovations in benefits, programs, and service delivery targeting the transitional year
 - Evaluate impact on outcomes and cost
- Implement evidence-based interventions
 - Enact legislative changes
 - Revise agency policy
 - Train workers
 - Educate consumers

Advice from Study Participants to Other Youth Aging Out

- Go to school, stay in care as long as you can.
- Prioritize. Decide what's most important. Being a grownup kind of sucks.
- Have a plan. Have a backup plan.
- You can't spend money on things you don't need. Pinch every penny.
- When you're in the gutter, you must not falter. You must conquer.
- Each kid has a different path that they can take. Even a good path has crap along the way.
- Never give up on yourself.

Questions & Discussion

