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

- Month 1: 18
- Month 2: 18
- Month 3: 18
- Month 4: 18
- Month 5: 17
- Month 6: 17
- Month 7: 17
- Month 8: 16
- Month 9: 16
- Month 10: 16
- Month 11: 15
- Month 12: 15

# of Participants
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

- 4-5 changes
- 1-3 changes
- No changes
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

- 1-2 Changes (50%)
- No Changes (33%)
- 3-5 Changes (17%)
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?

- ETV
- Scholarships
- Earnings
- Financial aid
- Grants
- Loans
- County
- Savings
- Foster family
- Family friend
Relationships

- Much more likely to maintain contact with biological parents than with foster families or social workers
- 2/3 to ¾ 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)

As 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”
Goal: Effectuate positive outcomes for youth; reduce costs

Next Steps In Research

- 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