

Resources on:

Outcomes for Youth Exiting Foster Care

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Up-to-date national statistics on outcomes for youth exiting foster care are not available. The few studies that have been done in the past are somewhat dated and/or report on a very small population. The following information, which summarizes the data known at this time and addresses anticipated improvements in data collection, is excerpted from a report to the U.S. House of Representatives (2000):

Looking at youths who emancipated from foster care between January 1987 and July 1988, Westat (Cook, 1990, 1992) reported that they were a troubled population. In the study group:

- 2/3 of 18-year-olds had not completed high school or obtained a GED;
- 61% had no job experience
- 38% had been diagnosed as emotionally disturbed;
- 17% had a drug abuse problem;
- 9% had a health problem;
- 17% of the females were pregnant.

During the time they had been in foster care, 58% of the study group had experienced at least three placement settings and about 30% had been in foster care an average of 9 years. Of the total number of youths who emancipated from foster care during the study period:

- 31% received services from their State's Independent Living Program;
- 29% received informal services, and
- 40% received no independent living services at all.

Westat conducted a followup with the study group and reported in 1992 that, 2.5 - 4 years after leaving foster care, many were still having problems:

- only about half had completed high school;
- a little less than half had jobs;

- only about 40% had held a job for at least 1 year;
- among the females, 60% had given birth.
- one quarter of the youths had been homeless for at least one night;
- fewer than 1 in 5 were completely self-supporting.

Later research conducted by the University of Wisconsin had similar findings (Courtney & Piliavin, 1998). Looking at Wisconsin youths 12-18 months after they emancipated from foster care in 1995, researchers found:

- 37% had still not completed high school;
- 12% had been homeless at least once since their discharge from foster care;
- while 81% had held at least one job since their discharge, only 61% reported being employed at the time of their interview, suggesting that job retention was a problem for some.
- of females, 40% were receiving public assistance, as were 23% of the males;
- access to medical care was a problem for 44% of the youths, usually because of a lack of health insurance;
- while almost half of the youths had received mental health services when still connected to the child welfare system, 21% reported receiving such services after they left foster care;
- although they were not reunited with their biological families by the child welfare system, many of the youths had contact with their original families after their discharge from foster care, with about one-third actually living with their families.
- at the same time, 40% reported continued and frequent contact with their foster parents
- about 18% of the youths had been incarcerated at some point since their discharge.

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) reported in 1999 that State and local administrators felt they could not provide youths who were leaving foster care with all the support they needed to make a successful transition to independent adult living. GAO reported that some programs lacked sufficient connections with employers to provide job leads, or opportunities for youths to practice skills in real-life settings, or supervised living arrangements for youths to become experienced at living self-sufficiently. GAO also noted that DHHS lacked sufficient information to evaluate the effectiveness of services.

Also in 1999, DHHS released a report reviewing the history of the Independent Living Program over the 10 years from 1987 through 1996 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1999). This report found that many eligible youth did not receive independent living services at all. Specifically, in 30 States that reported data for fiscal year 1996,

- 37% of eligible youth received no services;
- of those youth served in fiscal year 1996, 65% were either 16 or 17 years old, while 22% were 18 and the remainder were 19 or 20;
- half the youth were white;
- slightly more than half were females;
- African-American youth comprised 38%;
- Hispanic youth comprised 9%.
- half of the youth served had been in foster care less than 2 years, while 20 percent had been in care 5 years or longer;
- slightly more than a quarter of the youth had special needs;
- 9 percent were parents or pregnant.

To enable assessments of State independent living activities, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169) directed the Secretary of DHHS to develop a series of outcome measures, including the following: educational attainment, high school diploma, employment, avoidance of dependency, homelessness, nonmarital childbirth, incarceration, and high-risk behaviors. The Secretary also must identify data elements that can be used to track the number and characteristics of children receiving independent living services, the type and quantity of services provided, and State performance on the outcome measures. The Secretary must develop a plan to collect this information beginning with the second fiscal year that starts after the date of enactment, and must report to Congress on this plan and timetable within 1 year of the date of enactment (December, 1999). Once this data collection plan is in effect, States must submit the required reports or face financial penalties. In addition, the law requires the Secretary to conduct evaluations of innovative State Independent Living Programs or programs that have potential national significance. The law reserves 1.5% of each year's appropriation for such evaluation, technical assistance, performance measurement, and data collection.

The Department of Health and Human Services is currently in the process of developing outcome measures, but extensive statistical data will not be available for some time.

Other small recent studies that contain statistical information on former foster youth were conducted in:

Wisconsin

Dworsky and Courtney (2000), in which they examined unemployment insurance wage data and public assistance data of youth who exited foster care in the period 1992-1998 in Wisconsin. Very detailed statistical data is presented in their report, along with explanations regarding the limitations of the data. Some of their conclusions include the following:

- 21% of youths who exited foster care in 1995-1997 were unemployed and 24% only sporadically employed in the 2 years following their discharge;
- youth of color were significantly less likely to have been employed than those who were white;
- youth who had been discharged from foster homes were more likely to have been employed than those who had been discharged from institutions;
- total earnings among the youth in the sample were, on average, substantially lower than full-time minimum wage earnings;
- African-American youth earned less than whites;
- youth who had been discharged from foster homes earned more than those discharged from institutions;
- youth who had run away or been transferred to a state institution earned less than those who had been reunified, placed with relatives or adopted.
- employment while in foster care appears to be by far the best predictor of post-discharge employment;
- in the first 2 years after their discharge, less than 6% of youth who left care in 1995 - 1997 received AFDC/TANF cash assistance and/or Food Stamps, but by June 2000, 26% had;
- median total income from earnings, AFDC/TANF cash assistance and Food Stamps for the first two years after discharge was \$2848.

Nevada

Nevada KIDS COUNT (2001) interviewed 100 youth who had aged out of foster care at least six months ago. They found:

- 41% did not have enough money to cover basic living expenses;
- 34% earned less than \$5,000 in 1999, and 60% earned less than \$10,000;
- 24% had supported themselves at some time by dealing drugs;

- 11% had had sexual intercourse in exchange for money;
- while 63% were employed at the time of the interviews, 55% had lost at least one job since leaving care;
- 50% left foster care without a high school degree;
- 63% had obtained a degree or equivalent at the time of the interview;
- 30% had attended or were attending college, while 75% stated that they wanted to get a college degree;
- 19% had lived on the streets and 18% in homeless shelters;
- 30% had had a serious health problem since leaving care;
- 55% had no health insurance
- 38% were parents
- 41% reported violence in interpersonal relationships
- 45% had been in trouble with the law, and 41% had been in jail.

Texas

Similar statistics were reported in a small study of former foster youth in Texas (Texas Foster Care Transition Project 2001).

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Finally, an excellent source of information about independent living is the National Resource Center for Youth Development at the University of Oklahoma. Visit their website at <http://www.nrcys.ou.edu> for the latest information and publications on this subject.