



Experiences and needs of homeless youth with a history of foster care



Kimberly Bender^{a,*}, Jessica Yang^a, Kristin Ferguson^{b,1}, Sanna Thompson^c

^a University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work, 2148 S. High Street, Denver, CO 80208, United States

^b University of Southern California, School of Social Work, Montgomery Ross Fisher Building, Los Angeles, CA 90089, United States

^c University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work, One University Station, Campus Box D3500, Austin, TX 78712, United States

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ABSTRACT

Youth exiting the foster care system through emancipation are at an increased risk for homelessness and adverse social, health, and financial outcomes. However, because youth exiting foster care are difficult to locate once homeless, few studies have examined their needs and experiences on the streets. Quantitative interviews were conducted in a large multi-site pilot study of youth ($N = 601$) seeking homeless services in Denver ($n = 201$), Austin ($n = 200$) and Los Angeles ($n = 200$). Over one-third of the sample ($n = 221$) included youth who reported a history of foster care involvement. The study aimed to 1) describe youth with a history of foster care in terms of their homeless contexts (primary living situations, time homeless, peer substance use, transience, and victimization) and areas of need (education, income generation, mental health, and substance use); 2) determine how homeless youth with foster care history differ from their non-foster care homeless counterparts; and 3) identify factors associated with longer duration of homelessness among youth with a history of foster care. Findings suggest that youth with a history of foster care were generally living in precarious situations, characterized as dangerous and unstable, and they had significant needs in regards to education, income generation, mental health, and substance use treatment. Although few differences were observed between youth who reported a history of foster care and those who did not, foster youth reported greater childhood maltreatment and longer duration of homelessness. Foster care youth who reported greater transience and childhood physical neglect, as well as those who were living with relatives, friends, foster parents, or in facilities in the 6 months preceding the interview reported a longer duration of homelessness. Implications are discussed for child welfare and homeless youth service organizations regarding the unique needs of foster care youth who become homeless.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 402,000 youth are in foster care in the United States, living in placements other than with their biological parents due to child abuse and neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2014). Although the child welfare system aims to return youth home to their parents or find an alternative safe and permanent home, many youth run away or age out of foster care, emancipating before this goal can be accomplished, and making them vulnerable to homelessness. Yet, due to difficulty tracking this population, little is known about the needs and experiences of foster youth once homeless. The current study aims to characterize youth with a history of foster care, in terms of their experiences and needs while homeless, compare these experiences to those of youth without previous foster care

involvement, and determine which risk and protective factors are associated with greater duration of homelessness among youth with foster care history.

1.1. From foster care emancipation to struggles with homelessness

The 25,000 youth exiting care through emancipation (AFCARS, 2014), either by aging out of care at the age of 18 or by running away, are often unprepared to enter adulthood. Although foster care youth are expected to participate in independent living skills development and establish a transition plan in order to facilitate a smooth transition to adulthood (Fernandes, 2008), many youth are unprepared to support themselves financially upon aging out of care. Youth emancipating from foster care often experience higher rates of unemployment or obtain employment that is insufficient to meet their needs (Dworsky, 2005; George et al., 2002; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), resulting in fewer experiences of stable, long-term employment compared with individuals not involved in the child welfare system (Courtney et al., 2007). In addition, educational attainment for youth aging out of foster care consistently has been lower than the national average; only half of foster children earn a high school diploma before

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 303 871 6760.

E-mail addresses: Kimberly.bender@du.edu (K. Bender), Jessica.Yang@du.edu (J. Yang), kferg@hunter.cuny.edu (K. Ferguson), SannaThompson@utexas.edu (S. Thompson).

¹ Present address: The City University of New York, Hunter College, Silberman School of Social Work, 2180 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10035, United States.

emancipating from the foster care system (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Vacca, 2008). Although some research suggests greater proportions of youth who emancipate will eventually achieve a GED by their early 20s (Courtney et al., 2007), this delay in education may be costly in terms of lost income, skills, networks, and opportunities for employment (Atkinson, 2008). Such educational and employment service needs are likely to increase risk for homelessness.

Youth aging out of foster care are also at an increased risk of experiencing physical and mental health issues (Courtney et al., 2007; McMillen et al., 2005). Approximately 12% of emancipated foster youth report that they have a health condition or disability that significantly impacts their daily life (Courtney et al., 2007), and health problems often impact their ability to work (Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). Rates of mental health diagnoses (Brandford & English, 2004; McMillen et al., 2005) as well as illicit substance use (Brandford & English, 2004), abuse (Stott, 2012), and dependence (Courtney et al., 2005) are elevated among former foster youth. These employment, educational, mental health, and substance use challenges likely help to explain the residential instability and frequent moves common among youth who age out of care (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011).

Research finds many emancipated youth will become homeless. One seminal study (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009) evaluated homelessness outcomes for youth who emancipated from care in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Dworsky and Courtney (2009) found that youth aging out of the foster care system often left without adequate support and guidance to navigate their transition to adulthood; as a result, they experienced unstable and non-secure housing, with as many as two-thirds of youth experiencing homelessness within the first 6 months of aging out of care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009).

Once homeless, youth face uncertainty. Youth who leave foster care often end up living on the streets or in unstable housing arrangements, moving from friend to friend, or “couch surfing” with extended family members (Courtney et al., 2005) or sleep in their cars as a means to obtain shelter after aging out of the system (Brandford & English, 2004; Fowler, Toro, Tompsett, & Hobden, 2006; Reilly, 2001). Other work suggests that about one-third of youth report staying with a family member after aging out of care and benefit greatly from a positive relationship with a supportive adult family member (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Of those who experience homelessness, it is estimated that 20% will become chronically homeless (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009).

A great deal of research indicates that homelessness introduces and sustains many challenges for youth. The broader homeless youth population experiences poor educational outcomes (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002) and higher rates of unemployment (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). They are also at increased risk of experiencing victimization on the streets (Tyler & Beal, 2010), with 83% of homeless youth reporting experiences of direct physical or sexual assault, such as rape or an assault with a weapon (Stewart et al., 2004). Individuals living on the streets report elevated mental health problems (Whitbeck, Hoyt, Johnson, & Chen, 2007), particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (Whitbeck et al., 2007) and substance use (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000).

1.2. Risk and resilience framework for understanding homelessness among foster care youth

The risk and resilience framework may be useful for explaining how intrapersonal and environmental risk and resilience factors inhibit and promote positive development in young people, including securing stable housing. Risk factors are those intrapersonal and environmental factors that can increase the likelihood of future problem behaviors and negative outcomes, such as childhood adversity, trauma, or cumulative life events (Masten, 2011). In contrast, protective factors refer to those individual and environmental conditions that decrease the likelihood of problem behaviors, or that buffer or moderate the effects of risk (Fraser, Galinsky, & Richman, 1999). Within a risk/resilience framework,

the dynamic combination of risk and protective factors may intertwine to foster resilience. “Resilience is a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 858).

Given that homeless youth in general (Keeshin & Campbell, 2011) as well as youth who emancipated from foster care (Zlotnick et al., 2012), are likely to have experienced greater childhood adversity and are at greater risk for cumulative disadvantage, understanding the interplay between the risk and protective factors that contribute to or protect youth from homelessness is of critical importance. Risk factors have received greater attention in the literature. Child welfare factors such as greater number of foster care placements (Berzin et al., 2011; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013) as well as experiences of physical abuse and placement in group settings (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009) increase the risk of homelessness. Individual factors also predict homelessness, including low educational attainment, reduced financial resources, insecure attachments to supportive adults (Berzin et al., 2011; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013), running away from home, and displaying delinquent behavior (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Finally, whereas childhood maltreatment is the primary pathway into the foster care system, it is highly associated with youth homelessness as well (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010).

Although protective factors related to homelessness have received less attention in the literature, several important strengths of foster youth have been noted. Research finds many foster care youth are reflective about who they are and quickly develop a sense of self-reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The majority of this population expresses optimism about their futures (Courtney et al., 2001). For those who pursue higher education, youth with foster care experience report more motivation to be successful in college compared with other freshman students (Unrau et al., 2012). Such work describes the foster care population as a complex group of youth with significant needs and important strengths as they pursue independence.

Because youth with a history of foster care are difficult to locate once homeless, little is known in regards to the struggles they face and the factors associated with their homelessness duration. The current pilot study aims to address these gaps using a uniquely large, multi-city sample of homeless youth ($N = 601$), of whom over one-third ($n = 221$) report foster care involvement. Specifically this study aims to 1) describe youth with a history of foster care in terms of their homeless contexts (primary living situations, time homeless, peer substance use, transience, and street trauma) and areas of need (education, income generation, mental health, and substance use); 2) determine how homeless youth with foster care history differ from their non-foster care homeless counterparts; and 3) identify factors associated with longer duration of homelessness among youth with a history of foster care. Better understanding these topics will inform the child welfare system and homeless youth service organizations about the unique needs of foster care youth who become homeless.

2. Methods

2.1. Design and research settings

This large, cross-sectional, pilot study of homeless youth was conducted at agencies providing services to homeless youth in Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX; and Denver, CO. Researchers selected agencies based on existing relationships and agencies' commitment to host the study. Participating agencies were multi-service, non-profit organizations that offer homeless, runaway, and at-risk youth street outreach, meals, shelter, health care, counseling, educational, and employment services. Each investigator received human subjects' approval from her own university.

2.2. Sample and recruitment

A total of 601 homeless youth (ages 18–24) were recruited from homeless youth-serving host agencies in Los Angeles ($n = 200$), Denver

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