



The potential educational benefits of extending foster care to young adults: Findings from a natural experiment



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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated the employment and earnings benefits accompanying educational attainment, and the relatively poor educational attainment and economic well-being of young people who transition to adulthood from foster care. Policymakers' concern over these poor outcomes has long been reflected in U.S. child welfare policy, most recently in the provisions of the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success Act allowing states to claim federal reimbursement for extending foster care from age 18 to age 21. While the policy of allowing youth to remain in foster care past age 18 has promise as a strategy for helping them continue their education, empirical evidence of its impact is lacking. Using data from a longitudinal study of youth ($n = 732$) who transitioned to adulthood from foster care, this study takes advantage of between-state policy variation in the age at which youth are required to leave care to assess the relationship between extended foster care and educational attainment at age 26. Distinguishing between not having obtained a high school diploma or GED, having only a high school diploma or GED, and having obtained at least one year of college, each additional year in care is associated with a 46% increase in the estimated odds that former foster youth will progress to the next level of educational attainment, controlling for a range of youth characteristics measured at ages 17–18. Background characteristics including youth's gender, race, employment, parenting, educational performance and aspirations, and indicators of behavioral health problems are also associated with educational attainment in early adulthood.

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1. Introduction

Research has long demonstrated the employment and earnings benefits accompanying educational attainment, particularly postsecondary education (Hout, 2012). For example, in 2013 the unemployment rate among workers age 25 and over holding less than a high school education was 12.4%, which was higher than the rate among individuals with a high school diploma (8.3%), associate's degree (6.2%), or bachelor's degree (4.5%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Education level is also strongly associated with earnings; full-time workers with less than a high school diploma earn an average weekly wage of \$471, much lower than the average wages of those with a high school diploma (\$652), associate's degree (\$785), or a bachelor's degree (\$1066). Moreover, the advantages that accompany postsecondary education have been demonstrated in studies that control for factors that may be related to level of education and employment (Hout, 2012). Put simply, one's economic well-being as an adult is strongly influenced by the educational attainment one acquires by early adulthood.

That policymakers recognize the benefits of educational attainment for youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care has long been reflected in U.S. child welfare policy. For example, the 1999 John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act specifically includes educational support services as an allowable expense under the Chafee program, and the law's accountability provisions call for states to monitor educational attainment through age 21 for youth aging out of care. Subsequent amendment of the law created the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program that allocates funding to states for the provision of up to \$5000 per year to eligible youth, up to age 23, for allowable costs associated with obtaining postsecondary education and training. More recently, the older-youth provisions of the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act give states the option of extending foster care to age 21. In order for states to claim this funding on behalf of a youth, the youth must meet one of the eligibility criteria listed in the law, the first two of which pertain to obtaining further education: (1) completing high school or an equivalency program; (2) enrolled in postsecondary or vocational school; (3) participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment; (4) employed for at least 80 h per month; or (5) incapable of doing any of these activities due to a medical condition.

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The policy focus on supporting the educational attainment of transition-age foster youth is not surprising given the economic benefits of education and the longstanding focus of child welfare policy on helping prepare foster youth for economic self-sufficiency (Courtney, 2009). Research on the relatively poor educational attainment of former foster youth highlights the importance of identifying ways to better support their continuing education. Studies conducted over the past three decades show foster youth to be less likely than other youth to earn a high school diploma or GED (Blome, 1997; Cook, Fleischman, & Grimes, 1991; Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; Festinger, 1983; Frost & Jurich, 1983; Jones & Moses, 1984) and that former foster youth have low rates of college attendance (Cook et al., 1991; Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2001; Jones & Moses, 1984; Pecora et al., 2005). For example, a study that followed youth aging out of foster care in three states found that at age 26 they were over three times more likely than a national comparison group of other 26-year-old adults to not have a high school diploma or GED (19.9% for former foster youth compared to 6.1% of other young adults) and about one-tenth as likely as other similar age adults to have at least a four-year college degree (3.8% of former foster youth compared to 36.3% of other young adults) (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Recent research indicates that former foster youth earn about half as much and have an employment rate that is 20 points lower than young adults matched on educational attainment (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). However, increased levels of education have larger benefits for former foster youth than for youth from the general population, and at higher levels of educational attainment the two groups have similar employment rates, and earnings gaps between the groups become less pronounced (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). This suggests that improving the educational attainment of former foster youth is likely to provide them with significant economic benefits.

The policy of allowing youth to remain in foster care past age 18 arguably has considerable promise as a strategy for helping these young people continue their education. Most obviously, youth who remain in care are relieved of the primary responsibility for meeting their own basic needs, allowing them to focus on pursuing their education. This resembles the situation of many young adults not in foster care whose housing, food, and other necessities are subsidized by their parents. Extended care might also connect youth to a variety of educational supports (e.g., remedial education intended to help them obtain a high school degree or GED, advice about applying for college, college admission test preparation, assistance with applying for financial aid) that can be provided by their foster parents, child welfare agency caseworkers, transitional or independent living program staff, or staff of specialized educational-support programs to which youth are referred by child welfare agencies. Similarly, extended care might increase the likelihood that youth continue to obtain mental health and substance abuse treatment services that they have had access to while in care. In fact, research has shown that remaining in care past age 18 is associated with increased receipt of support in the areas of general education, college preparation, employment, financial literacy, health, and housing (Courtney, Lee, & Perez, 2011). Research has also shown that exit from care proximal to the age of majority is associated with discontinuity in behavioral health services (Courtney et al., 2005; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009). Interestingly, foster youth appear to believe that remaining in care will facilitate their continuing education; a recent study of 17-year-olds in California's foster care system, which extended care to age 21, found that the most common reason youth gave for wanting to remain in care after they turned 18 was to receive help achieving their educational goals ($n = 217$; 45.6%) followed by wanting to remain in care to continue receiving housing and other material support ($n = 190$; 37.1%) (Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014).

While youth can remain in care past age 17 only if state policy provides for this option, they cannot be required to remain in care once

they become adults, and jurisdictions undoubtedly vary in the extent to which their policies and practices encourage youth to stay in care. Two studies have examined the correlates of how long transition-age youth remain in care in states that provide care to age 21. McCoy, McMillen, and Spitznagel (2009) analyzed youth-interview data and public agency case records from a longitudinal study of a sample of 404 older youth from eight Missouri counties conducted between December 2001 and May 2003. The youth were interviewed at age 17 and every 3 months thereafter to age 19, with 325 young adults (80%) interviewed at the conclusion of the study. By their 19th birthday, 234 (57.9%) of the study participants had exited the foster care system. Using child welfare administrative records, juvenile court caseload data, and U.S. Census data from Illinois, Peters (2012) examined potential sources of variability in the likelihood that youth remained in care past age 17. The study followed through age 21 a sample of 12,272 youth who had been in care for at least a year at age 17 due to a dependency court petition, and who had their 17th birthday between 1997 and 2005. In contrast to the earlier exits observed in Missouri, nearly three-quarters of the Illinois youth (74.1%) remained in care through their 19th birthday and nearly half (47.5%) remained in care to age 21.

Both studies considered the potential impact of individual child factors and macro-level factors on youth's time in care past age 17. In multivariate models predicting length of time in care, youth characteristics including gender, race, placement type (e.g., family foster care, group care, independent living arrangements), placement instability, number of spells in care, length of time in care prior to age 17, alcohol use, and a history of juvenile detention were statistically significant predictors in one or both studies. Factors measured at the geographic or system level, including the region of the state in which a youth was placed, the mean number of new child abuse and neglect cases handled by a county, and the mean number of juvenile court cases handled by a county's courts were also statistically-significant predictors of length of stay in one or both studies. Based on the Illinois study, Peters (2012) concluded that individual-level characteristics account for relatively little of the variability in youth's likelihood of remaining in care, with regional administrative factors, particularly the functioning of county juvenile courts, playing a larger role. Interestingly, even after controlling for the individual factors they found to be associated with length of stay after age 17, McCoy et al. (2009) found that the hazard of exit was 1.7 to 2.7 times higher for youth in regions other than the city of St. Louis than in the city itself.

Only one study to date has considered the question of whether extending foster care to young adults actually helps improve their educational outcomes. Using data from the same study that is this basis of the analyses reported here, Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack (2007) compared educational attainment at age 21 between youth who aged out of care in Iowa and Wisconsin, where youth were routinely discharged around their 18th birthday, and youth who aged out of care in Illinois, where youth could remain in care to their 21st birthday. After controlling for observed differences in baseline characteristics, the estimated odds of ever having attended college were approximately four times higher for the Illinois youth than for the youth from Iowa and Wisconsin, and the estimated odds of completing at least one year of college were about 3.5 times higher for the youth from Illinois than for the youth from the other two states.

The study reported here builds on the previous study in two ways. First, we follow the young adults' educational attainment through age 26, allowing for an examination of whether any observed educational benefits of the extended care policy persist in the years after all youth have exited care. Second, we expand upon the between-state comparison employed in the earlier study by estimating the association between additional time in care after youth's 18th birthday and their later educational achievement, while controlling for baseline characteristics of youth and the state youth had lived in while in care. This provides for a clearer examination of the relationship between state-level policy differences, youth's lengths of stay in care, and educational

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