



Functional outcomes among sexual minority youth emancipating from the child welfare system



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ABSTRACT

The heterogeneity of youth emancipating from the foster care system makes it difficult to establish the extent to which their functional outcomes are equivalent across different subgroups. In the present study, we use secondary data from the Multi Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (MSEYP) to explore the challenges faced by sexual minority youths in comparison to their heterosexual peers. We focus on measurements of key independent living outcomes at age 19 to obtain a broad picture of how sexual minority youth fare during the period of transition to adulthood. Bivariate results indicate that the deficits for sexual minority youth are noteworthy across all categories of functional outcomes (i.e. education, employment, homelessness and financial stability). Furthermore, results from binary logistic regression models indicate that sexual orientation was associated with each category of functional outcomes, even when controlling for demographics and child welfare history factors. Findings suggest that sexual minority youth leaving foster care are particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes and may require more intensive supports during the period of transition to adulthood. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, researchers, child welfare professionals and legislators have worked to systematically address the difficulties foster care alumni experience relative to their non-foster care peers. There is substantial research documenting the challenges and obstacles faced by foster care alumni, ranging from interpersonal, psychosocial, and health challenges to difficulties in fulfilling age-pertinent achievements, such as completing higher education, securing consistent employment and living in stable and independent environments (Barth, 1990; Courtney, 2009; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; Simmel, Shpiegel, & Murshid, 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Much of this work has been instrumental in addressing the process by which foster youth transition out of the child welfare system, as well as in identifying gaps that persist following the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (commonly referred to as the Chafee Act). The Chafee Act is notable for broadening the scope and type of transitional services and supports provided to foster youth, as well as the age of eligibility for receipt of these services (National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000). In essence, these

program modifications recognized that preparation for adulthood requires an initiation of sustained support delivered to youth early in adolescence and not simply a flurry of training exercises just as youth are about to depart the system.

These policy advances notwithstanding, the heterogeneity of youth involved with the child welfare system makes it difficult to establish the extent to which functional outcomes (i.e., housing; education; employment) are equivalent across all members of this population, or whether specific sub-groups of foster care alumni are more disadvantaged than others. This is an important and timely concern as many states have modified and expanded their child welfare services to better address the broad needs of adolescents, including service provision during the typically vulnerable phase of transition to adulthood (Children's Bureau's, 2013). For instance, many states have expanded the age at which youth can remain involved with the child welfare system, or opt to re-open system involvement (Children's Bureau's, 2013). These changes hint at the arguably protective nature of many child welfare programs geared toward this age group. However, it is necessary to examine variations in outcomes among different subgroups to understand how existing services and programs can be refined to promote positive functioning for all foster care alumni. For this paper, we use data from the Congressionally mandated project entitled Multi Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs to explore the challenges that a specific sub-group – sexual minority youth – face, in comparison to their heterosexual peers. We focus on measurements of key independent living

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outcomes to get a broad picture of how sexual minority youth fare during the transition from foster care to independence.¹

1.1. Brief overview of relevant policy and federal initiatives

This project is partially informed by two federal policy actions for foster youth: the Chafee Act and the more recent Information Memorandum (IM) of 2011 ([Administration for Children and Families \[ACF\], 2011](#)). The Chafee Act replaced the former federal Independent Living structure that was in place to serve foster youth as they prepared to depart the child welfare system. Following the passage of the Chafee Act, states could elect to provide services, namely the provision of Medicaid and housing assistance, to youth after the age of 18 (generally until age 21). And, critically, funding for expanding the services and programs for transitioning youth was increased ([National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000](#)). Thus the Chafee Act reflects a remarkable shift in states' focus and responsibility for foster youth transitioning to adulthood, including a commitment to promoting self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, in 2011, the Children's Bureau issued an Information Memorandum that outlined the need for ensuring best practices within the child welfare system such that states are actively and effectively "protecting and supporting" sexual minority youth while they are in foster care. The IM is explicit in conveying that states need to improve best practices in addressing sexual minority youths' safety and permanency needs. We argue that a logical extension of the 2011 IM and the 1999 Chafee Act mandates is to ensure that sexual minority youth are receiving effective preparation for life after leaving foster care. However, little information currently exists about the outcomes of sexual minority youth as compared to their heterosexual peers. Understanding the extent of challenges faced by these youth is critical for a successful implementation of both pieces of federal action.

1.2. Gaps in services for sexual minority youth

There is a strong basis for focusing on the outcomes solely for sexual minority youth who are involved with the child welfare system. While the transition to adulthood encompasses a set of risks for most foster care alumni, sexual minority youth may face additional challenges and perils. Recent research as well as policy memos and legal briefs and reviews reveal the extent to which sexual minority youth contend with stressors presumably connected to their sexual orientation: rejection by biological families ([Elze, 2014; Khoury, 2007; Tamar-Mattis, 2005; Yarbrough, 2012](#)); lack of permanency ([Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002; Wilbur, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006; Yarbrough, 2012](#)); victimization by peers ([Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Gallegos et al., 2011](#)); placement in restrictive settings ([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Khoury, 2007; Sullivan, Sommers, & Moff, 2001; Tamar-Mattis, 2005](#)); and, insufficient or absent support from staff, foster parents, and caseworkers ([ACF, 2011; Elze, 2014; Gallegos et al., 2011; Mallon et al., 2002; Nolan, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2001; Tamar-Mattis, 2005](#)).

First, sexual minority youths' involvement with child welfare services may directly stem from family conflicts surrounding sexual orientation, resulting in irrevocable dislocation from family members. Entry into the child welfare system may be instigated by biological families' rejection of youths' sexuality ([Elze, 2014; Khoury, 2007; Mallon et al., 2002](#)), which may also constrain opportunities for reunification once in out-of-home care. As [Elze \(2014\)](#) notes, "(U)nlike their heterosexual and gender-conforming peers, LGBTQ youths often face familial rejection in response to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression. Heterosexism in families can directly result in the youth's ejection from the home, or it can exacerbate other parental

problems, heightening familial conflict until the youth is kicked out or leaves" (p. 162).

Second, compounding their obstacles in reunifying with biological families, sexual minority youth are at enhanced risk for placement disruptions, which can be attributable to numerous factors, namely peer victimization within youths' living environments ([Elze, 2014; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Mallon et al., 2002; Sullivan et al., 2001](#)), stigmatization for their sexual orientation ([ACF, 2011; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Khoury, 2007; Tamar-Mattis, 2005](#)), and lack of appropriate foster parents who can provide safe, stable, and supportive homes ([Mallon, 2011](#)). Numerous studies and law reviews have documented the chronic verbal and physical mistreatment many sexual minority youth endure from their peers while in out-of-home care ([Estrada & Marksamer, 2006; Tamar-Mattis, 2005](#)). Though sexual minority youth are the victims in these situations, they are nonetheless the ones to repeatedly move, in search of a safe out-of-home living arrangement. This may result in placement in more restrictive settings such as congregate care, despite the fact that such a placement is implemented for purposes of personal safety and not for therapeutic reasons ([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Elze, 2014](#)).

Further complications ensue for youth as a result of inappropriate placement in institutionalized living arrangements. For instance, placements in restrictive settings are generally for "difficult cases," which inappropriately sweeps sexual minority youth under this label. In turn, such a label could have negative implications for reunification possibilities with families as well as for placements in more family-like settings. Moreover, residing in restrictive settings could result in running away from out-of-home placement and child welfare protection altogether ([Elze, 2014; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Nolan, 2006](#)). Homelessness, of course, exposes youth to an additional set of risk elements, further hampering early adulthood outcomes ([Nolan, 2006](#)).

A third factor associated with sexual minority status is the absence of adults who can provide emotional support and acceptance. One consequence of impermanent living situations and/or placement in congregate living is the obstruction of opportunities for youth to develop nurturing and stable relationships with caregivers, staff, potential mentors, and others who are instrumental for both formal and informal delivery of preparation for adulthood ([Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Mallon, 2011; Nolan, 2006](#)). In addition, staff and caseworkers' interactions with sexual minority youth may range from inadequate to harmful. Some caseworkers and staff may have a cursory understanding of youths' sexual orientation and their personal needs while other staff may actively ostracize them and prevent them from engaging in necessary services ([Nolan, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2001](#)). Finally, the lack of mentors for all child welfare-involved youth is a recognized challenge ([Renne & Mallon, 2014](#)); for sexual minority youth, it potentially heightens their troubled trajectories for aging out of the system.

1.3. How do sexual minority youth fare in the transition to adulthood?

Although sexual minority youth share many commonalities with their heterosexual counterparts in that they all are contending with traumatic backgrounds, disrupted childhoods, and impaired interpersonal relationships with adults and caregivers ([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013](#)), they also represent a somewhat distinct group. This group has a great deal to manage while involved with child welfare system—unsafe and inconsistent living environments, chronically severed ties with family members, peer victimization, and rejection by those who are assigned to care for them and provide support. These factors may contribute to deficiencies in the quality of care afforded them, resulting in insufficient support for a great number of issues, including attention to the transition into young adulthood. In addition, their time in foster care may hasten the onset of or exacerbate mental health difficulties, further compounding post-transition outcomes. Ultimately, if sexual minority youth face a unique array of challenges while in the child welfare system, what happens to these

¹ It is important to note that at the time the data were collected for this project, the maximum age at which foster youth could remain in the child welfare system was 18 years (California Department of Social Services, 6/1/2015).

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