



## Former foster youth: Employment outcomes up to age 30



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### ABSTRACT

A youth's departure from home marks the beginning of adulthood. Studies of former foster youth who aged out of care showed that these youth generally had poor employment outcomes in the period between ages 18 and 21. Using linked child welfare, wage and public assistance administrative data from three states (California, Minnesota and North Carolina), we investigated whether or not age-out youth continue to experience less employment and significantly lower earnings compared to their peers even into their mid-twenties in all three states and through the late twenties in North Carolina. The current study is the first to follow employment outcomes for age-out youth longitudinally up to age 30. We also assessed the significance of demographic, placement history and other factors on the employment and earnings of youth who aged out of foster care. Study findings showed that low rates of employment and earnings persisted for age-out youth compared to the low-income and national samples through age 24 in all three states and age 30 for North Carolina. Further, we found that work experience prior to age 18 improved employment outcomes in the mid to late twenties in all three states and longer stays in care improved employment outcomes in two of the study states. The primary implication of the study is that former foster youth need assistance well into adulthood. Federal and state initiatives have focused on extending foster care to age 21. However, our findings suggest that these youth continue to struggle even up to age 30.

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### 1. Introduction

A picture is emerging of poor life outcomes for former foster care youth. Youth who age out often have bouts of homelessness, criminal activity, and incarceration (Courtney, Piliavin, & Grogan-Kaylor, 1995; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2011). Many suffer from physical and mental health challenges as a result of past abuse or neglect. In 2011, over 26,000 youths aged out of the USA's foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). These age-out youth enter into adulthood relatively alone, which is in contrast to many youth who continue to receive emotional and financial support from parents and other family members (Furstenberg, 2010; Furstenberg, Rubén, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). The financial assistance may extend into the early thirties for many of these young people with family connections.

The results of the current study showed that age-out youth heading into their thirties are in need of as much, if not more, financial support as their low-income peers who do not enter adulthood separated from their families of origin. The current study adds to prior research on employment outcomes of former foster youth in the following ways. First,

the study is one of few multistate studies (Courtney et al., 2011; George et al., 2002; Pecora et al., 2006). Second, the study is strengthened by the inclusion of a comparison group of low-income youth on employment outcomes. Because we know that many youth who enter foster care come from low-income families, low-income youth are arguably more similar to age-out youth in socioeconomic status than a national comparison group of youth. Finally, the study is the first to follow employment outcomes for age-out youth longitudinally up to age 30.

#### 1.1. Problem scope and significance

A primary task in transitioning to adulthood, and the focus of this study, is finding and sustaining employment. Studies of former foster youth who aged out of foster care find that these youth generally experience high unemployment, unstable employment patterns, and earn very low incomes in the period between ages 18 and 21 (Cook, Fleishman, & Grimes, 1991; Courtney et al., 2001; Dworsky & Courtney, 2001; George et al., 2002). Studies also document post-foster care welfare receipt and low rates of high school completion (Courtney et al., 1995, 2001; Festinger, 1983; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2003).

What is less known about these youth is how they fare in their mid to late twenties after the initial transition to adulthood. Of the few

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studies that have looked at outcomes in this time period, including Courtney et al. (2011), Pecora et al. (2006), and the current study, all indicated that age-out youth continued to struggle with sustained employment and earnings more than their peers.

## 2. Prior research on employment outcomes

Researchers have primarily used two methods to assess employment outcomes of former foster youth—surveys of youth directly or employment and earnings data from administrative records. These lines of inquiry have yielded remarkably similar and consistent results: Youth who age out of foster care tend to have less stable employment and lower earnings than their same-age peers (Cook et al., 1991; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Courtney et al., 2005, 2007, 2011; Dworsky, 2005; George et al., 2002; Pecora et al., 2006; Singer, 2006).

In terms of survey research with this population, the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth is the most comprehensive. The Midwest Study is a longitudinal survey of youth with five waves of data collection every two years from age 19 to the most recent collection period of age 26 (Courtney et al., 2011). The study included a sample of 732 youth who aged out of foster care from Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Results indicated that only 40% of former foster youth were employed at age 19 compared to 58% of a nationally representative sample of 19-year-olds who had participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Courtney et al., 2005). By age 26, 45% of former foster youth were employed which reflected a slight increase of 5% from age 19; whereas, 80% of the national comparison group were employed at age 26 with an increase from age 19 of 22% in employment (Courtney et al., 2011).

Another multistate survey of former foster youth, the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, interviewed a sample of 479 youth who had been in family foster care in Oregon or Washington state for 12 months or longer between the ages of 14 and 18 during the study period of 1988 to 1998 (Pecora et al., 2006). The average age of the sample at the time of data collection was 24 with approximately one-third of the sample between ages 26 and 33. Like other studies of employment outcomes, former foster youth who were eligible to work (e.g., not full-time students or homemakers) were less likely to have been employed than the national average of adults between the ages of 20 and 34 (80% compared to 95%).

George et al. (2002) found a similar pattern of lower employment among youth who aged out of care from California, Illinois, and South Carolina with administrative earnings data. George et al. included comparison groups of former foster youth who left care through reunification with their parents as well as low-income youth. Findings indicated that employment rates at two years after care were similar for the age-out and reunified youth groups at about 45% while the rate for low-income youth was somewhat higher at 50%. Compared to reunified youth and low-income youth, youth who aged out of care had significantly lower earnings with an average of \$6000 annual wages, which was well below the 1997 federal poverty level of \$7890 per year.

Both Courtney et al. (2011) and George et al. (2002) found similarly low rates of employment for age-out youth at about 45%, whereas Pecora et al. (2006) found that most youth were employed with a rate of 80%. Two single-state studies using administrative data also found that the majority of foster youth were employed at some point after they left the system. Using Utah state wage data, Singer (2006) found that 86% of youth who exited foster care between 1999 and 2003 reported earnings within three years of leaving care. Dworsky (2005) examined employment outcomes two years after youth exited care with wage data from Wisconsin between 1992 and 1998 and found that 80% were employed at some point during that time. However, consistent with prior research, both studies showed that earnings were below the poverty threshold for these youth.

Prior research has attempted to identify significant factors associated with employment and earnings outcomes of former foster youth. Research with administrative records has typically only examined variables available in these datasets, such as youth's race, gender, age, and foster care placement history. We know that these are unlikely to be satisfactorily complete descriptors of the characteristics of foster youth because these youth have high rates of mental health problems, among other issues (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Burns et al., 2004). Survey research has involved a somewhat broader range of variables that contribute to more nuanced understanding of outcomes, including mental health problems, substance abuse, social support, educational attainment, and use of independent living services.

In terms of demographics, a number of studies indicated poorer employment and earnings outcomes for African American youth compared to White youth (Dworsky, 2005; George et al., 2002; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010). Findings related to gender have been less consistent. George et al. (2002) and Dworsky (2005) generally found that females were significantly more likely to be employed than males. However, despite greater odds of working, females in the George et al. study earned significantly less than males. Dworsky did not find a significant gender difference in earnings for employed youth. While Courtney et al. (2011) did not find a significant difference in the likelihood of employment between males and females, among employed youths, males worked significantly more hours per week and had higher wages than females.

Researchers have examined a number of factors related to the foster care placement experience. A few studies have shown that placement instability negatively impacted employment and earnings (Hook & Courtney, 2011; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2006). Hook and Courtney (2011) and Dworsky (2005) both found that exiting care after age 18 resulted in improved employment outcomes. Scholars have also assessed the effects of maltreatment type, type of discharge placement, total length of stay in care, and independent living services, among other factors, with few consistent results emerging across studies (Dworsky, 2005; George et al., 2002; Hook & Courtney, 2011; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Naccarato et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2006).

Beyond demographic and foster care placement experiences, prior research has shown that higher educational attainment has been associated with better employment outcomes for former foster youth (Hook & Courtney, 2011; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Naccarato et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2006). Higher educational attainment and staying in care beyond age 18 are likely related as many states make continued education a requirement for extended foster care (Hook & Courtney, 2011). George et al. (2002) and Dworsky (2005) found that employment prior to age 18 improved employment outcomes after leaving the system. Naccarato et al. (2010) found a negative impact of some mental health disorders on earnings while substance abuse was actually associated with increased earnings. Finally, Hook and Courtney (2011) showed that becoming a parent had differential effects by gender with males having an increased likelihood of employment whereas the likelihood decreased for females.

## 3. Research questions

A key question and focus of this study is whether youth who age out of foster care catch up or continue to experience less employment and significantly lower earnings than their peers even into their mid to late twenties. We also assessed the stability of youth's employment by looking at consecutive quarters employed. Our methods are similar to George et al. (2002) in that both studies linked child welfare and unemployment insurance data for multiple states. In contrast to George et al.'s study, which covered only about three years after care, our data extends six years after discharge from care for former foster youth from California, Minnesota, and North Carolina and an additional six years for North Carolina (a total of 12 years after care).

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