



# Receipt of help acquiring life skills and predictors of help receipt among current and former foster youth

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## ABSTRACT

US law has long recognized the need to help prepare foster youth for the transition to adulthood and states receive funds specifically intended to provide their foster youth with independent living services. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to whether foster youth in fact receive the services states are supposed to provide using federal funds. This study uses data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth to describe the kinds of help foster youth receive in making the transition to adulthood and the factors associated with help receipt. Study findings call for a redoubling of efforts to provide foster youth with the assistance called for in federal law, provide support for the extension of foster care through age 21 in the interest of ensuring that such assistance is provided, highlight the need to involve foster parents more actively in providing youth with life skills training, and call into question whether current efforts to assist foster youth in acquiring independent living skills are well targeted.

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## 1. Introduction

US law has recognized the need to help prepare foster youth for the transition to adulthood since Title IV-E of the Social Security Act was amended in 1986 to create the Independent Living Program. States received funds specifically intended to provide their foster youth with independent living services. This federal support for foster youth making the transition to adulthood was enhanced in 1999 with the creation of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. That legislation increased funding to \$140 million per year, expanded the age range deemed eligible for services, funded for a broader range of purposes (e.g., room and board), and granted states the option of extending Medicaid coverage for youth who age out of foster care until age 21. Amendments to the law added funding for vouchers for post-secondary education and training to the range of federally-funded services and supports potentially available to current and former foster youth making the transition to adulthood.

More recently, there has been a fundamental shift toward greater federal responsibility for supporting foster youth during the transition to adulthood (Courtney, 2009). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 amended Title IV-E to extend the age of eligibility from 18 to 21. States are now able to claim federal reimbursement for the costs of foster care maintenance payments made on behalf of Title IV-E eligible foster youth until they are 21 years old. To qualify for reimbursement, Title-IV E eligible

foster youth age 18 and older must be either completing high school or an equivalent program; enrolled in postsecondary or vocational school; participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment; employed for at least 80 h per month; or incapable of doing any of these activities due to a medical condition. They can be living independently in a supervised setting as well as placed in a foster home or group care setting, but the protections afforded to foster children under age 18 (e.g., judicial or administrative case review every 6 months) still apply. State child welfare agencies are also required to help young people develop a youth-directed transition plan during the 90 days immediately before they exit care. The Fostering Connections Act does not reduce states' obligations to provide independent living services to foster youth; the provisions of the Chafee Program, including funding for independent living services, remain in effect.

While concern has been raised about the effectiveness of independent living services in improving outcomes for foster youth making the transition to adulthood (Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; United States General Accounting Office, 1999), little attention has been paid to whether foster youth in fact receive the services states are supposed to provide using Chafee Program funds. While the federal government has surveyed state child welfare administrators to ask them what kinds of services their state provides and approximately how many eligible youth receive services, no reliable data have been regularly collected at the state or national level on provision of independent living services (United States Government Accountability Office, 2004).<sup>1</sup> The surveys

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<sup>1</sup> The implementation of the National Youth in Transition Database beginning in FY2011 may begin to fill this data gap as states begin to provide standardized reports on provision of independent living services.

of state program managers indicate that many gaps in services exist, but provide no detail regarding who is not being served (US GAO, 2004).

This study attempts to fill an important gap in knowledge about provision of independent living services to current and former foster youth by using information gathered from interviews with a representative sample of foster youth making the transition to adulthood in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Relying on answers to questions about whether the young people participating in the study have received various kinds of help, we find that foster youth report receiving few of the kinds of help that the Chafee Program is intended to fund between ages 18 and 21. Moreover, our findings suggest that child welfare system-related factors likely play more of a role than the individual needs of foster youth in driving service provision.

## 2. Methods

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) is a prospective study following 732 youth in their transitions out of care. The study collects information about the following domains: demographics; out-of-home care placements; living arrangements; relationships with the family of origin; social support; receipt of independent living services; education; employment; economic hardships; receipt of government benefits; health and mental health status and service utilization; sexual behaviors; pregnancy; marriage and cohabitation; children and parenting; and delinquency and criminal justice system involvement. Four waves of in-person interviews have been completed approximately every two years, following participants from age 17 through ages 23 or 24. Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers using computer-assisted personal interviewing, with audio-enhanced computer-assisted self interviewing used in the case of sensitive questions (e.g., questions concerning criminal behavior and drug use). In addition to these structured interviews with the overall sample, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a subset of study participants, but those interviews did not focus on service provision per se. All procedures used in the study involving human subjects have been approved by the relevant institutional review boards.

### 2.1. Sample

The Midwest Study consists of a random sample of youth making the transition to adulthood from the foster care system in three states, Illinois ( $n = 474$ ), Wisconsin ( $n = 195$ ), and Iowa ( $n = 63$ ). The sampling frame consisted of youth who were 17 years old at the time of sample selection, had been placed in out-of-home care due to abuse, neglect or dependency, and had been in care for at least 1 year. All of the youth who met the criteria in Iowa and Wisconsin were included in the original sample, as well as a two-thirds random sample of eligible youth in Illinois. Youth excluded from the sample included those with developmental disabilities or severe mental illnesses that made it impossible for them to participate in the survey. Youth were also excluded if they were incarcerated, in a psychiatric hospital, or on the run or missing from their placement during the field period of the initial interviews. All efforts were made to interview institutionalized youth at subsequent interview waves. Four waves of data have been collected, beginning before the youth left care at age 17 or 18 (followed by ages 19, 21 and 23–24).

### 2.2. Research question and conceptual framework

As noted above, current U.S. policy calls for the provision of independent living services to foster youth between the ages of 18 and 21. This study seeks to answer the following question: What factors are associated with current and former foster youths' receipt of help preparing for independent living from public child welfare agencies between ages 17 and 21? The Midwest Study provides a unique

opportunity to help answer this question since it covers the relevant age range during a period when youth should have been receiving help acquiring independent living skills. During the first three waves of Midwest Study interviews, youth were asked about the help they received across several key life domains in acquiring skills associated with independent living. The analyses reported here describe youths' receipt of this help and factors associated with receipt of help.

Given the dearth of research on the topic, the study is largely exploratory in nature. Nevertheless, we were interested in assessing the extent to which potential *indicators of need for services and barriers to service provision* might be associated with the likelihood that youth received help. This interest is consistent with the notion, embodied in federal and state policies calling for individualized independent living plans, that life skills training should be provided in an individualized manner that is tailored to the unique needs of each foster youth. We focused our examination of the potential role of need for services in the areas of education and employment services. For example, all else being equal, it might be expected that youth who were behind in school might be more likely to receive general education support, such as study skill training, than youth who were on track in school. Similarly, effective targeting of employment assistance would likely mean that youth with less work experience would get more assistance with finding and maintaining employment than those who already had an employment record. We considered individual barriers to services to be characteristics of youth that might limit their ability to participate in services. We also examined the potential impact of characteristics of the youths' experience in the child welfare system, which we called *system factors*, and the *contextual factor* of urbanicity.

### 2.3. Measures

Table 1 describes the survey items used to construct measures that describe the receipt of independent living services. Tables 2a and 2b show descriptive statistics for the constructed independent living services received at waves 1, 2 and 3, in addition to individual, system, and contextual factors that are predicted to have an effect on receipt of independent living services.

Slightly over half (56.4%) of the sample were female, and slightly over half (57.0%) of the sample were African American youth. Two-thirds of the sample (64%) was from Illinois. At baseline, the average educational attainment was 11th grade, and 95% were still enrolled in school. Although 82% reported ever having been employed, only a little over one-third (35.2%) were currently employed at ages 17–18. Over one third (37.5%) lived in a foster placement without relatives, 29.8% lived in a foster placement with relatives, and 17.6% lived in a group home at the time of the baseline interview. Three-quarters (74.7%) of the sample reported that they felt close to their care provider, and more than half (58.7%) agreed that their social workers were helpful. The average number of months spent in care after turning 17 years old was almost two years (23 months).

Youth reported receiving an average of 14 total types of independent living services at wave 1 (ages 17–18), 9 total types of services at wave 2 (age 19), and 6 total types of services at wave 3 (age 21). As noted above, this study is largely exploratory in nature given the absence of prior research on predictors of receipt of independent living services, but we indicate below where we ventured hypotheses regarding expected relationships between independent variables and service receipt.

#### 2.3.1. Independent living services (ILS)

The dependent variables in our analyses are domain-specific counts of self-reported types of help received prior to interview waves 2 and 3, when the young people were 19 and 21 years old respectively. Youth were asked about “training you may have received

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