



# The plans, goals, and concerns of pre-emancipated youth in foster care



Daisy Lemus<sup>a</sup>, Susan P. Farruggia<sup>a,\*</sup>, Gary Germino<sup>b</sup>, Esther S. Chang<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Illinois at Chicago, United States

<sup>b</sup> California State University, Fullerton, United States

<sup>c</sup> Soka University of America, United States

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the plans, goals, and concerns of foster care youth prior to leaving care. Participants were 179 pre-emancipated youth between the ages of 17 and 20 years old ( $M = 17.82$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) from a large metropolitan area in Southern California. Self-articulated immediate plans were grouped into 4 major categories and self-articulated life goals were grouped into 10 categories while also examining the prioritization of, estimated time frame for, and youth's sense of control over their life goals. Survey and interview data reveal the importance of educational and occupational life goals and their prioritization. Youth reported a high level of certainty in their immediate plans, but the youth were less explicit in describing their immediate plans for the year after foster care. Foster youth may have difficulty identifying concrete steps to make plans a reality despite their ideas for the future. Youths' worries and concerns about their post-emancipation plans and life goals typically centered around academics and finances. This study contributes to the limited literature on the life goals and plans for foster youth; these results reinforce the need for greater support in planning and goal setting prior to emancipation.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background information of emancipated foster care youth

According to the 2015 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), there were nearly 428,000 children as young as infancy to 20 years of age in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Sometime between the ages of 18 to 21 years, youth in foster care go through a process known as emancipation, in which they “age-out” of the foster care system, becoming legally responsible for themselves. During the 2015 fiscal year, 20,789 adolescents emancipated out of the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Unfortunately, many foster youth transition into adulthood without the support of family and further, the services and resources that would help them become independent adults are often inadequate (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Lockwood, Friedman, & Christian, 2015; Stott, 2013). Thus, the transition is often difficult for youth exiting care, with research indicating that these youth face challenges securing steady employment, are at risk for low educational attainment, and face elevated levels of homelessness, which are key indicators for a successful transition to adulthood (Kushel, Yen, Gee, & Courtney, 2007; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Stott, 2013; Trout,

Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008).

With regard to youths' employment, research indicates that youth in care are less likely to be employed and when employed, earn lower wages than their peers, resulting in economic hardships (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Lockwood et al., 2015; Naccarato et al., 2010). For example, Goerge et al. (2002) found that emancipated youth earned lower wages than youth from low-income families who had no experience with foster care. This gap may be attributable, in part, to the relatively low educational attainment of youth in care (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Indeed, research clearly indicates the importance of educational attainment in the transition to adulthood for all youth. Of concern, many youth in care fail to graduate from high school. Research suggests that youth in the foster care system have greater dropout rates than their same-age peers (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004; Stott, 2013).

Homelessness and residential instability are also prevalent among youth emancipating out of foster care (Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Kushel et al., 2007; Lockwood et al., 2015). A study on young adults exiting care found that they had high rates of homelessness within the 18-months following emancipation (Kushel et al., 2007). When comparing youth in foster care to a matched sample of youth with similar risk of negative outcomes, youth in foster care had higher rates of homelessness, lacked housing stability, lived in poorer neighborhoods,

\* Corresponding author at: University of Illinois at Chicago, 601 S. Morgan Street, UH 2704, Chicago, IL 60607, United States.  
E-mail address: [spf@uic.edu](mailto:spf@uic.edu) (S.P. Farruggia).

and depended more on public housing assistance (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011).

With a vast literature about poor transitional outcomes for many youth emancipating out of care, it is critical to explore how youth are preparing for their future. While studies on adolescent life goals and plans focus on the general population (i.e., youth not in foster care), little research has examined the life goals and plans of pre-emancipated youth. Understanding their future goals, as well as their plans to achieve those goals, prior to their emancipation from care is essential to help support youth as they transition from care.

### 1.2. Adolescent life goals & plans for the future

Life goals are what individuals aim to accomplish in their life and as such, can be considered as “organizers” of individual development (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). According to the lifespan theory of control (Schulz, Wrosch, & Heckhausen, 2003), individuals are most effective in regulating goals when exerting primary control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995), meaning they take active steps to invest in goals by seeking out situations or resources to achieve them. Adolescents' life goals typically include themes related to educational attainment, occupation, and family (Carroll, Gordon, Haynes, & Houghton, 2013; Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008; Nurmi, 1991). Chang, Chen, Greenberger, Dooley, and Heckhausen (2006) found no ethnic-group differences in self-articulated life goals and long-term aspiration levels among graduating high-school seniors who were of similar age and from the same county as the sample used in the current study. The authors found that a majority of the participants in their community sample articulated educational goals and had high aspirations (e.g., completing 4-year college), suggesting a great deal of optimism and ambition before high school graduation. Educational goals were also given the highest priority, earliest time frame for completion, and were perceived to be the most controllable compared to self-articulated life goals relating to occupation or family (Chang et al., 2006). More interestingly, longitudinal follow-up of the sample also indicated that the more ambition community youth had before high school graduation, namely the more their educational aspirations exceeded their high school senior grades, the higher educational attainment in the years after high school (Heckhausen & Chang, 2009).

Although high educational aspirations for a community youth appeared adaptive, even for youth with poor high school grades, this may not be the case among foster care youth who face daunting and unique challenges. For example, in a study assessing predictors of educational aspirations and expectations in a low-income sample, youth in foster care, compared to youth who were not in foster care, had lower educational aspirations and expectations (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Potential sources for the lower educational ambitions of youth in foster care were related to their lower academic self-perceptions and lack of parental educational support (Kirk et al., 2011). The adaptiveness of high aspirations and ambition in the school to work transition is likely dependent on a number of contextual factors, including support from others as well as residential and educational stability, issues that confront many youth in foster care who experience a dearth of family resources and experience multiple placement disruptions. Thus, the extent to which high educational aspirations are reliant on a stable and predictable social environment, youth in foster care may be at a disadvantage when these resources are lacking.

Key to a successful transition also involves youth taking ownership, or control, over the direction of their lives. Several studies about the experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care emphasize the importance of self-determination and agency (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007; Pryce, Napolitano, & Samuels, 2017). Geenen and Powers (2007) found that many youth expressed frustration with the lack of opportunity to practice self-determination skills while in foster care, but were expected to be fully in control of their lives upon emancipation. The youth also

expressed concern that both their parents and caseworkers disregarded their opinions. Likewise, caseworkers in the same study expressed concern that they often made plans for the youth post-transition without the youths' participation in the planning. The lack of fostering personal agency while in care may pose barriers for these youth as they may be less able to seek support from others as they navigate the transition to independence (Pryce et al., 2017).

### 1.3. Foster youths' concerns about the future

Qualitative studies of youth transitioning from foster care highlight youths' concerns about their future plans. Lack of social support and financial resources as well as fear of the unknown are key concerns echoed by older youth preparing to transition from foster care (Mitchell, Jones, & Renema, 2015). These concerns may be linked to a lack of stability and loss of important familial ties while in foster care (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). Moreover, youths' history of instability and lack of control in key areas of their lives may undermine their confidence in their plans for the future. As youth in care are at greater risk for experiencing poor transitional outcomes than their same-age peers, and do not have the same safety nets available (Lockwood et al., 2015; Stott, 2013), it is critical that these youths begin life planning and goal setting before leaving care. Attention to youths' concerns about their future goals, and plans to achieve those goals, can illuminate potential areas of intervention to ensure youth in foster care have the necessary tools and resources as they embark on their journey into adulthood.

It should be noted that the research on life goals focuses on young people's longer-term goals. Indeed, the two studies focusing on students in their final year of high school (e.g., Chang et al., 2006; Heckhausen & Chang, 2010) ask for goals in the next five to 10 years. While these are clearly important, for youth on the brink of transition from care, immediate plans, such as housing and employment, are also critically important to elucidate. As such, it is important to differentiate between life goals, plans to achieve those life goals, and immediate plans upon leaving care.

### 1.4. The current study

This study addressed the plans, goals, and concerns for the future of older youth (i.e., between 17 and 20 years of age) in foster care. Specifically, the present study examined the immediate plans (i.e., within the next year), life goals (i.e., within ten years), and concerns regarding their immediate plans and life goals of pre-emancipated youth. It was expected that youth in care would have life goals related to education, occupation, and family (Chang et al., 2006). This study also addressed youths' reported prioritization of goals, perceived control over those goals, and the intended age of completion of each goal to investigate the level of self-determination and agency. On the one hand, it was expected that youth would be relatively optimistic and focused on educational attainment due to their pre-emancipated status and the optimism typically found among young people (Chang et al., 2006). On the other hand, youths' hardships while in care may have dampened their motivation (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Lockwood et al., 2015).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

This study is based on data from a three-year longitudinal study, with annual data collections, that assessed the emancipation process of 188 youth who were in protective custody of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for a minimum of one year at the time of the first wave of data collection (Time 1). Participants emancipated from the child welfare system at different

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