



Employment outcomes of young parents who age out of foster care



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ABSTRACT

Despite the high rate of early parenthood among youths in foster care, relatively little is known about the employment outcomes of young parents after they age out of the child welfare system. This study analyzed administrative data for 1943 recently emancipated youths who were the parent of at least one child. Like prior studies of former foster youths, this study finds that only half of the parents were employed at any point during the first four quarters after exiting care, most of those who worked were not consistently employed, and the earnings of parents who were employed were very low. Several demographic and placement history characteristics were associated with an increase or decrease in the odds of being employed and/or with total earnings among the parents who worked. The implications of these findings for policy and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Despite the high rate of early parenthood among youths in foster care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Putnam-Horstein, Cederbaum, King, & Needell, 2013), and the fact that struggling parents have been identified as a distinct subgroup of former foster youths (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010), relatively little is known about what happens to young parents after they age out of the child welfare system. To address this gap in our knowledge, this study used administrative data to examine the employment outcomes of former foster youths who became parents while in foster care. In addition to looking at whether these parents were employed and how much they earned during the first year post-emancipation, we investigated the relationship between those outcomes and an array of demographic and placement history characteristics.

Before turning to a description of our data sources and methodology, we briefly review the literature on the employment outcomes of former foster youths, the effects of adolescent childbearing on employment, and the prevalence of early parenthood among youths in foster care. We also provide some information about the context in which the present study was conducted.

1.1. Employment and foster care

Since it was created in 1999 by the Foster Care Independence Act, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program has been providing states with federal funds to help youths transitioning out of foster care become self-sufficient young adults. However, research on the employment outcomes of former foster youths suggests that far too many of these

young people are not able to support themselves. Some of these studies have used survey data collected directly from former foster youths (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010). Other studies have linked the child welfare records of former foster youths to quarterly Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records (Dworsky, 2005; Goerge et al., 2002; Macomber et al., 2008; Singer, 2006). Regardless of the type of data used, the overall pattern is the same: low rates of employment, unstable work histories, and earnings that are often less than the poverty threshold for a single adult.

Two other consistent findings have emerged from this research. First, young people who age out of foster care are less likely to be employed, and earn substantially less when they work than young people in the general population who have not been in foster care (Courtney et al., 2010; Macomber et al., 2008), including those from low-income families (Macomber et al., 2008). Second, despite increasing over time, both the employment rates and earnings of young people who age out of care tend to remain low well into their mid-twenties (Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011; Courtney, Zinn et al., 2011; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Macomber et al., 2008).

A number of studies have gone beyond descriptive analyses to identify predictors of employment and/or earnings using multivariate techniques. Some of the identified predictors reflect patterns that are evident among young people in the general population (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Bird & Bryant, 2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Office of the President of the United States, 2015). For example, a number of studies have found that former foster youths who are African American are less likely to be working (Dworsky, 2005; Dworsky et al., 2010; Hook & Courtney, 2011) and earn less when they are employed (Dworsky, 2005; Dworsky et al., 2010; Goerge et al., 2002; Naccarato et al., 2010) than their white counterparts. Other studies have found that educational attainment is

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positively associated with both employment (Hook & Courtney, 2011) and earnings (Hook & Courtney, 2011; Naccarato et al., 2010).

Although both Goerge et al. (2002) and Macomber et al. (2008) failed to find a consistent relationship between foster care placement history characteristics and employment outcomes, other research suggests that the employment outcomes of former foster youths are related to their experiences while in foster care. For example, studies have found that exiting from congregate care rather than family foster care is associated with a lower likelihood of being employed and with lower earnings (Dworsky, 2005; Hook & Courtney, 2011); that placement instability is negatively related to earnings, but not to employment (Hook & Courtney, 2011); and that exiting foster care at an older age is associated with more favorable employment outcomes (Dworsky, 2005; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Macomber et al., 2008). There is also evidence that employment prior to age 18 is associated with an increase in the likelihood of being employed post-discharge (Goerge et al., 2002; Macomber et al., 2008).

1.2. Employment and early parenthood

The adverse consequences of teenage motherhood on economic well-being have been well-documented (An, Haveman, & Wolfe, 1993; Hofferth & Hayes, 1987). A number of studies suggest that adolescent childbearing has a negative effect on future employment and earnings, even after controlling for other factors that might explain the differences in labor market outcomes between young women who were teenage mothers and their peers who delayed becoming parents. For example, using propensity score matching with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), Lee (2010) found that teenage mothers were 15% less likely to be employed, 12% less likely to participate in work-related activities, and 10% less likely to be employed full-time than young women who postponed childbearing. However, there was no difference in weekly wages among full-time workers. Similarly, using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), Fletcher and Wolfe (2009) found that adolescent childbearing is associated with a substantial reduction in wages.

One explanation for the poor labor market outcomes experienced by young women who were teenage mothers is that adolescent childbearing impedes the accumulation of human capital (Becker, 1993). Consistent with this theory, numerous studies have found that teenage mothers are less likely to complete high school and graduate from college than their peers with no children (Ashcraft & Lang, 2006; Levine & Painter, 2003; Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010). However, some have argued that the seemingly adverse consequences of adolescent childbearing are actually an artifact of the disadvantaged backgrounds from which most teenage mothers come (Geronimus, 1991; Geronimus, Korenman, & Hillemeier, 1994).¹

1.3. Early parenthood and foster care

Despite a precipitous decline in the U.S. teenage birth rate among all racial and ethnic groups over the past two decades (Ventura, Hamilton, & Mathews, 2014), youths in foster care continue to be at very high risk of becoming young parents. Because the federal government does not require states to report the number of youths in foster care who are parents, and most states do not have a system to track this information, much of what we know about the high rate of early parenthood among this population comes from just a handful of studies.² The

Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) followed >700 young people in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they transitioned out of foster care and into adulthood. By age 19, 32% of the young women and 14% of the young men reported being the parent of at least one child, compared with 12% of 19-year-old women and 7% of 19-year-old men in the general population (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010).

More recently, Putnam-Horstein et al. (2013) linked child protective services (CPS) records from the California Department of Social Services to birth records from the California Department of Public Health using probabilistic matching to estimate the percentage of 17-year-old female foster youths in Los Angeles County who gave birth during their teen years. Of the 6749 young women who were in foster care at age 17 between 2003 and 2007, 11.5% gave birth at least once before age 18 and 27.5% gave birth at least once before age 20.

2. Present study

Very little is known about the employment outcomes of youths who become parents while still in foster care. One study that did examine the effects of parenthood on the employment outcomes of former foster youths found that having a child increased the likelihood that young men would be employed, decreased the likelihood that young women would be employed, and had no effect on hourly wages among either young men or young women who worked (Hook & Courtney, 2011).³ Moreover, some of parents did not give birth to or father their first child until after they aged out of foster care.

In the present study, we address three primary research questions:

1. What are the employment outcomes of youths who become parents while they are in care during the first year after they emancipate?
2. Are there gender differences in the employment outcomes of youths who become parents while they are in care?
3. What demographic or placement history characteristics are associated with better or worse employment outcomes among recently emancipated parents?

We address these questions by capitalizing on the existence of a unique service delivery network in Illinois that targets the state's pregnant and parenting foster youths. Although few state or local child welfare agencies systematically track young parents in foster care, Illinois has long been an exception in this regard due, in large part, to a lawsuit (Hill vs. Erickson) filed in 1988 against the state's public child welfare agency. That lawsuit alleged that the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) had violated the rights of the pregnant and parenting youths in its care by systemically failing to provide them and their children with adequate services or appropriate placements. The case was certified as a class action in 1989 and settled with a consent decree in 1994. As part of that consent decree, DCFS agreed to provide pregnant and parenting youths with services and placements tailored to their needs. Ulich Children's Advantage Network (UCAN), a private child welfare agency, was contracted to develop a new case management system for pregnant and parenting youths, which led to the creation of the Teen Parenting Service Network (TPSN) in 1998.

TPSN is charged with providing specialized services and placements to pregnant and parenting youths in DCFS care and monitoring the provision of those services and placements by other agencies that contract with TPSN or with DCFS. These services include parenting assessment, parenting education, safe sex and healthy sexuality education, family planning and subsequent pregnancy prevention, pregnancy options

¹ Although a number of approaches have been used to address this selection bias problem, each has limitations (see Lee, 2010, for a discussion).

² The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (P.L. 113–183) will require the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to include state-level data on the number of pregnant or parenting youths in foster care in its annual report to Congress on child welfare beginning in Fiscal Year 2016.

³ The researchers speculated that a lack of affordable or reliable childcare may prevent young mothers from seeking or accepting employment, whereas child support obligations may have motivated young fathers, a majority of whom were noncustodial parents, to work.

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