



Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Foster care is one of the most far-reaching interventions targeted at children who are abused or neglected by their parents, or who are engaged in anti-social behavior (Lindquist & Santavirta, 2014). The large number of children in foster care and the high cost of child welfare, makes the outcomes of former foster youth a trending topic in research. However, research that combines results on different extents (education, employment, wages, housing, mental health, substance abuse and criminality) is sparse. Using the PRISMA method, the outcomes of 32 original quantitative studies were compared. The studies were categorized into two groups reflecting on the child welfare orientation of the country: child protection vs. family service (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). The results are clear as well as troubling. In both systems, children who leave care continue to struggle on all areas (education, employment, income, housing, health, substance abuse and criminal involvement) compared to their peers from the general population. A stable foster care placement, establishing a foothold in education and having a steady figure (mentor) who supports youth after they age out of care seem to be important factors to improve the outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Each year, about 400000 children in the USA are served in the foster care system in (U.S. department of Health and Human Services, 2013). These children are participants in a child welfare system that costs the U.S more than \$29.4 billion annually (Devooght & Cooper, 2012). In 2013, 10% of the children that aged out of foster care started living independently (U.S. department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Despite the large number of children in foster care and the high cost of child welfare, research that combines results on different extents (education, employment, mental health, substance abuse, criminality and housing) is sparse.

1.1. Children in foster care

When the safety of a child cannot be assured, they are most often removed from their family and placed into the foster care system (Kessler et al., 2008; Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009). Foster care settings include (non-)relative foster family homes, group homes,

emergency shelters, residential facilities and pre-adoptive homes (Pecora et al., 2009). Most foster children reside in relative- (24%) or nonrelative (53%) foster homes. Only 25% stay in trivial homes, pre-adoptive homes or institutions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

There are many reasons why children are placed in the foster care system. Inevitably, all these factors determine a vulnerability and shape the journey to adulthood for young people leaving care (Wade & Dixon, 2006). Foster children often experienced different types of maltreatment (Pecora, 2012; Pecora, Kessler et al., 2006; Salazar, 2013; Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014) and a subsequent lack of stability in their childhood (Salazar, 2013). Furthermore, a considerable percentage of children (18%) enter the system because of their own behavioral problems (Kessler et al., 2008; Pecora et al., 2009). Many of the foster children come from low-income families with few resources and/or social support (Lindquist & Santavirta, 2014; Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). Additionally their parents often have high rates of physical, psychological and social problems (von Borczykowski, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2013; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Furthermore, approximately 55% of the children in foster care are children from ethnic minorities (Villegas & Pecora, 2012). It is important to remind ourselves that this large group of minority children might have different needs and risk factors. In 2013, nearly one third (29%) of the children in foster care were two years or younger when they entered the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013), and even though the policy makers have the intention to shorten the length of placements through permanency planning programs, 54% of the children

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stayed in care longer than twelve months in 2012 ([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013](#)).

1.2. Aging out of care

Research shows that the last decades have been hard on young people making the transition to independent living. The decline in the labor market, the rapid growth of education and the shortage of affordable housing has extended young people's reliance on family support and since youth aging out of foster care lack family support, their transition to adulthood becomes even more challenging ([Dworsky, 2005](#); [Jones, 2010](#); [Lindquist & Santavirta, 2014](#); [Wade & Dixon, 2006](#); [Zlotnick et al., 2012](#)). One third of the foster care agencies indicate that they continue to provide help even after the children leave the foster care system. However, research indicates that support from social workers drastically declines after leaving care ([Wade & Dixon, 2006](#)). Furthermore, not only do they have less support, foster children are obliged to become independent at a younger age than their peers from the general population ([Dworsky, 2005](#); [Jones, 2010](#); [Wade & Dixon, 2006](#)).

To provide in the needs of youth aging out of care, many programs are organized to support emancipating youth ([Pecora, Williams et al., 2006](#); [Reilly, 2003](#)). Despite these programs, youth aging out of care indicate that they were not properly prepared for independent living ([Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010](#); [Wade & Dixon, 2006](#)). Nearly half of the foster care alumni report that they were not ready to live alone at the moment they left care ([Pecora, Williams et al., 2006](#)). The research of [Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, and Painter \(2007\)](#) indicates that former foster youth have a positive experience with the independent living classes but report a lack of opportunities to test the skills they learned in real life. They also note that they have concrete needs such as money, safe housing and bus passes, in which the programs do not foresee ([Naccarato et al., 2010](#); [Scannapieco et al., 2007](#)).

1.3. Theoretical foundation

For this review, the theoretical model of [Bronfenbrenner \(1977\)](#) was used as a framework. This model explains and links developmental outcomes to the multiple and diverse environmental contexts to which a person is exposed across the life course. These environmental contexts can range from personal interactions to cultural inputs ([Bronfenbrenner, 1977](#)). The model is relevant to this research because it explains how outcomes of former foster care children can be influenced by their environmental experiences. For example, their personal characteristics (biological and genetic makeup, personality and cognitive ability) can interact with their direct environment (the foster family or the residential group home where they stay, the other children that live there, the school they go to). The society they live in and the cultural aspects also influence this interaction. To increase understandings of the outcomes of foster care alumni, it is important to look at the results with the model of Bronfenbrenner in mind. There is no simple linear influence in this matter, the different systems all influence each other and determine the outcomes.

1.4. Purpose of this study

There is a significant amount of research available on the outcomes of former foster children, however, combining and comparing different studies remains a challenge and studies that provide a clear overview are scarce. Current research indicates that youth aging out of care are extremely vulnerable and seem to experience many negative outcomes. It remains important to invest in research to reduce the gap between former foster youth and the general population ([Jones, 2010](#)). The current study provides important information regarding the outcomes of foster care alumni on different areas. This understanding can help inform those who work with (former) foster youth, preparing them for emancipation and developing programs that more closely meet their

needs. The aim of this article is to give the reader a short yet comprehensive presentation of what the most recent researchers found on the perspectives of children who grew up in foster care.

2. Method

This review was conducted confirm with the PRISMA methodology (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) ([Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009](#)). During the period of October 2014 until October 2015 three electronic databases (PsychINFO, Springer, Science Direct) were searched using the following terms: (1) "Foster care" or "Foster alumni" or "Foster Children" and (2) "Long-term perspectives" or "Long-term results". The same search terms were used to identify relevant literature through Google Scholar. All found articles and literature were manually screened for further relevant studies, matching the following including and excluding criteria. All searches were restricted to publications in English or Dutch language and availability of full text. To create an overview of the information found in the past ten years, all articles were restricted for publication years 2004–2015, there were no restrictions concerning gender or other demographical criteria for participants. Because the study focusses on youth who already aged out of care, only articles where participants were 17 years or older were included, there was no maximum age for participants. Only publications in which family foster care or residential care were evaluated were considered for inclusion in the study. Only studies using original quantitative research methodologies were included, qualitative research was excluded because of a lack of comparability. To compare the outcomes of the different studies, studies were categorized into the child welfare system orientation from their country. [Gilbert, Parton, and Skivenes \(2011\)](#) distinguished two main orientations: child protection oriented and family service oriented child welfare systems. Child protection oriented systems are mostly found in Liberal countries such as the United States, Canada and England. These governments use an individual, moralistic way of protecting children and legal procedures (such as out of home placement) are used to ensure the safety of the child. Family service oriented systems use a more social, psychological frame, which thinks of parents as important partners in care. Countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Finland (Social-Democratic) and, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany (Conservative) most often use this framework in child welfare. [Table 1](#) describes the used studies to analyze the outcomes of foster care alumni. Because of space limitations, readers are referred to the major study publications for additional data.

3. Results

3.1. Educational accomplishments

3.1.1. High School education

Overall young adults with foster care experience, as well in child protection systems as in family service systems, encounter considerable difficulties achieving a high school degree. All found studies report lower success or graduation rates for former foster children. The rates found in research are very diverse (40–97%) ([Dworsky & Courtney, 2009](#); [Harris et al., 2010](#); [Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005](#); [Hook & Courtney, 2011](#); [Martens, 2011](#); [Pecora, Kessler et al., 2006](#); [Pecora, Williams et al., 2006](#); [Villegas et al., 2011](#)), this can possibly be explained by the different ages used in the samples of the studies ([Fig. 1](#)).

3.1.1.1. Child protective systems. The Midwest Study found that only 64% of the young alumni completed high school by the age of nineteen, compared to 91% in the general population ([Dworsky & Courtney, 2009](#); [Hook & Courtney, 2011](#)). However, when foster children were asked the same question at the age of 29, 85% graduated high school or obtained a General Education (GED) ([Pecora, Williams et al., 2006](#)). This nearly matches the general population rate (87%) ([Pecora, Williams et al.,](#)

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