



Homelessness and aging out of foster care: A national comparison of child welfare-involved adolescents



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Homelessness
Foster care
Aging out
Adolescence
Policy

ABSTRACT

The present study represents the first large-scale, prospective comparison to test whether aging out of foster care contributes to homelessness risk in emerging adulthood. A nationally representative sample of adolescents investigated by the child welfare system in 2008 to 2009 from the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being Study (NSCAW II) reported experiences of housing problems at 18- and 36-month follow-ups. Latent class analyses identified subtypes of housing problems, including literal homelessness, housing instability, and stable housing. Regressions predicted subgroup membership based on aging out experiences, receipt of foster care services, and youth and county characteristics. Youth who reunified after out-of-home placement in adolescence exhibited the lowest probability of literal homelessness, while youth who aged out experienced similar rates of literal homelessness as youth investigated by child welfare but never placed out of home. No differences existed between groups on prevalence of unstable housing. Exposure to independent living services and extended foster care did not relate with homelessness prevention. Findings emphasize the developmental importance of families in promoting housing stability in the transition to adulthood, while questioning child welfare current focus on preparing foster youth to live.

1. Introduction

A growing body of research links “aging out” of foster care with housing problems in the transition to adulthood (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009). Policymakers fear abrupt disruption of services at age 18 combined with chaotic family environments in the face of developmentally normative experimentation leave many vulnerable to homelessness. To prepare foster youth for the transition to adulthood, federal policy focuses on programs that train independent living skills. However, little evidence demonstrates benefit of these programs for foster youth transitioning into adulthood; moreover, no studies directly compare rates of homelessness among aged-out versus other at-risk young adults. The resulting evidence gap inhibits the development of effective and scalable prevention initiatives. The present study leverages nationally representative and prospective data to test how aging out contributes to risk for homelessness and whether programs and policies targeting the transition to adulthood mitigate the risk.

1.1. Aging out of foster care and homelessness

Each year, > 20,000 youth age out of foster care and lose their safety nets overnight (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). When foster youth turn 18—or, in some states, 21—they lose access to the financial, educational, and social supports provided through the child welfare system. These youth fare poorly compared to their peers across young adult domains, including mental health problems, substance abuse, and underemployment (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2011).

Developmental theory suggests foster care policies may compound turmoil inherent in the transition to adulthood, particularly with regards to securing adequate housing. Substantiation and placement status are poor indicators of family risk, as reports alone often indicate elevated family instability. Similar rates of reinvestigation are observed among families with substantiated and unsubstantiated cases, for example, suggesting that child welfare system involvement alone may represent a threat to family and youth well-being (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2000; Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009). However, those who remain

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.03.017>

Received 16 December 2016; Received in revised form 27 March 2017; Accepted 28 March 2017

Available online 30 March 2017

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out-of-home until reaching the age of majority may face the greatest consequences to development. Most emerging adults depend on parents to provide housing at some point in young adulthood, while they also receive emotional and financial supports that allow them to engage in developmentally appropriate risk-taking behavior (Arnett, 1998; Hartnett & Furstenberg, 2013; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Strained relationships among foster youth with caregivers jeopardizes family safety nets that protect adolescents against dire consequences of mistakes, such as failing to pay rent on time, getting behind on utility payments, or overspending budgets (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). The abrupt disruption of service at age 18 combined with unreliable family connections elevate the risk for housing problems among aged-out emerging adults (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010).

Several recent studies link aging out with subsequent housing problems. A two-year follow-up of aged-out youth in a large Midwestern metropolitan area estimates one-fifth remain continuously inadequately housed, while an additional 30% of youth experience at least one night of homelessness (Fowler et al., 2009). In a representative sample of foster youth in California, over one-third of aged-out 19-year-olds experience homelessness and over 40% couch-surf (Courtney et al., 2016). An analysis of administrative data in Washington State finds more than one-quarter (28%) of youth experienced a homeless episode within 12 months of aging out of foster care; those who were African American, had experienced prior housing instability, or were parents faced the greatest risk (Shah et al., 2016). Similarly, a prospective study of aged-out youth from three Midwestern states (“The Midwest Study”) finds over 30% of aged-out young adults report episodes of living on the streets by age 26 (Dworsky et al., 2013). The Midwest Study is one of the largest to date examining housing risk among former foster youth, and suggests significant risk in the transition to adulthood. However, the sample is geographically limited and does not compare aged out youth to other former child welfare-involved youth. A systematic review of the intersection between child homelessness and foster care involvement finds most studies target one population over the other without examining overlapping needs, thus leaving gaps in knowledge regarding effective interventions (Zlotnick, Tam, & Zerger, 2012).

Local and regional estimates indicate housing instability as a challenge for the child welfare system, but no direct comparisons exist between aged-out and similarly at-risk youth. It remains unclear whether foster care programs and policies contribute directly to vulnerability for homelessness. Moreover, the lack of national comparisons limits understanding of the scope of the problem and effectiveness of existing services.

1.2. Foster care policies and aging out

Federal policy response to elevated rates of homelessness among foster youth focuses on preparing youth for adulthood through training in education, employment, financial literacy, and other areas necessary for independence. The Independent Living Program (ILP) of 1986 provides states with funds to prepare adolescents age 16 and up in foster care for the transition to adulthood, but program type and quality vary widely across the country (Goldman, Capitani, & Archambault, 1999; Stott, 2013). Despite the policy emphasis on preparation for adulthood, a recent national study finds only half of adolescents in foster care receive any ILP services (Okpych, 2015), and youth report receiving fewer housing-related services compared to other areas (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). Furthermore, little evidence supports the effectiveness of independent living programs (Barth, Greeson, Zlotnick, & Chintapalli, 2011). Early evaluation studies show inconsistent impacts in the transition to adulthood (Cook, Fleishman, & Grimes, 1991; Scannapieco, Schagrin, & Scannapieco, 1995), and randomized controlled trials find few differences in key areas, such as education, employment, and delinquency between youth referred for independent living programs versus youth who receive other services (Courtney,

Zinn, Zielewski, Bess, & Malm, 2008; Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2015). Only one RCT examines housing outcomes, and finds no significant impact of independent living services on residential instability or homelessness (Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011).

More recent federal legislation addresses vulnerability in the transition to adulthood by prolonging the availability of foster care services. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) incentivizes states to extend foster care services for youth up to age 21. As of 2015, > 20 states and Washington, D.C. opted to extend foster care (Williams-Mbengue & Mccann, 2015). Few studies test the impact of extending foster care on young adult outcomes given the recency of the legislation, and preliminary evidence remains inconclusive regarding homelessness prevention. A two-year follow-up of older youth in California suggested those who choose to remain in foster care receive housing supports and experience lower rates of homelessness compared with youth who opt out of services (Courtney et al., 2016). A similar trend emerges in a comparison of youth from states that extended foster care versus ended services at 18 years; however, the benefit dissipates upon termination of foster services at 21 (Dworsky et al., 2013). Thus, extension of foster care services may only temporarily delay homelessness.

A need exists for representative data documenting homelessness risk in the transition to adulthood and the influence of current programs and policies. Limited large-scale data exist on child welfare populations, and no existing studies compare housing outcomes of aged-out to other child welfare-involved youth. Furthermore, federal policies target youth aging out of foster care without empirical evidence of benefits. Greater understanding of risks is necessary in order to develop effective, developmentally informed interventions.

1.3. Present study

The present study examines the prevalence of housing instability and homelessness among a nationally representative sample of adolescents exiting the child welfare system. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being is the only nationally representative sample of youth who were subjects of abuse and neglect investigations by child protective services. Follow-up interviews with youth 18- and 36-months later assess housing instability and homelessness as youth transition to adulthood. Comparisons focus on three groups of youth transitioning into adulthood – youth who aged out of foster care, foster youth who were reunified with family, and youth who were never removed from the home. Categorizations represent hypothesized differences in vulnerability for housing problems associated with family separations during the transition to adulthood among at-risk youth. The study tests the following hypotheses: 1) aged-out youth experience the highest risk for homelessness in the transition to adulthood; 2) reunified youth exhibit a higher risk of homelessness compared to youth who were never placed out of home by the child welfare system; 3) youth who aged out of foster care and received independent living services are less likely to experience homelessness; and 4) youth who remained in foster care in states that extended eligibility exhibit the lowest probability of homelessness.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Data came from the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II), a nationally representative longitudinal survey of child welfare-involved families (Dowd et al., 2012). NSCAW II sampled children age birth to 17.5 years who were subjects of child abuse and neglect investigations closed between February 2008 and April 2009 ($n = 5873$). The cohort oversampled infants, open cases requiring ongoing services, and youth placed out-of-

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