



Struggles, successes, and setbacks: Youth aging out of child welfare in a subsidized housing program

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ABSTRACT

Youth aging out of the child welfare system report high rates of unstable housing and homelessness which has been associated with problems including employment, education, health and mental health. This study used ethnographic data to examine a program providing subsidized apartments to youth aging out. The study sought to understand youths' and service providers' perceptions and experiences about the program. Receiving services and stable housing did not eliminate youths' struggles with employment, education, and mental health. Setbacks in even one domain often undermined their ability to maintain housing. Youths' stability and well-being were compromised by structural barriers such as housing quality, location of apartments, and access to transportation. Service providers face complex challenges while assisting youth aging out.

1. Introduction

As youth age out of the child welfare system, they are more likely than their peers to experience housing instability and homelessness. Research has found youth aging out experience a high level of housing instability with over 40% of youth in one study experiencing housing instability in the first two years after leaving care (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009). In the Midwest Study, a longitudinal study of youth aging out of care in three midwestern states, 31% of young adults who had aged out reported at least one night not having a place to stay or “couch surfing,” staying with someone temporarily and often sleeping on a couch (Courtney et al., 2011). Estimates of homelessness among youth aging out range from approximately 20% to almost 40% (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Fowler et al., 2009; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003).

Unfortunately, struggles with housing are not the only obstacle youth face while aging out of care. Youth aging out are more likely than their peers to have poor outcomes across other domains besides housing, including education, employment, health, mental health, substance abuse, justice system involvement and early parenting (Courtney et al., 2001, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). These domains do not function in isolation; struggles in one area potentially impact and destabilize other aspects of life. Complex reciprocal interactions exist among these domains with challenges in one area impacting others. For example, unstable housing may factor into not completing an educational program which limits job opportunities to those paying lower wages. This, in turn, contributes to inadequate income to secure stable housing and financial resources

necessary to pursue an education. The lives of youth aging out are complex with many potential obstacles thwarting a smooth transition out of care and into adulthood. The present study seeks to understand the experiences of a group of youth aging who are a subsidized housing program to better understand their lived experiences and the service delivery of a housing intervention for youth aging out.

1.1. Transitioning to adulthood

Many youth aging out had a childhood where they felt they grew up without parents (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), and as the youth transition into adulthood, once again their parents may not support and care for them at the same level of their peers' parents. As youth age out of care between age 18 and 21, they transition to adulthood largely on their own. This expectation is out of alignment with the reality for most of their peers who have support from parents well into adulthood (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Schoeni & Ross, 2005).

Developmentally, aging out coincides with the beginning of emerging adulthood, a developmental period from ages 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). During the time period of emerging adulthood, which has been marked by a period of instability, young people become increasingly focused on themselves and explore their identity (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Scholars have emphasized that unlike their peers, youth aging out lack a safety net from their parents and options that other emerging adults have such as moving in with their parents or receiving financial assistance during a crisis are not available to the same extent (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011). Additionally, youth report that being in foster care impacts their transition

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to adulthood (Berzin et al., 2014). It remains unclear how youth aging out negotiate emerging adulthood with limited resources and more challenges and how this impacts their development and life trajectory.

1.2. Housing interventions

Housing may provide stability and promote positive outcomes for youth aging out (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Fowler et al., 2009). Thus, various programs have been created to promote housing stability among youth aging out. (See Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden, and Rosenau (2012) for details about types of housing interventions for youth aging out.) There have been few studies of housing programs for youth aging out, and a need exists for more research to determine to what extent programs help prevent homelessness and promote housing stability (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013). To date, the literature is largely descriptive; much remains unknown about increasing housing stability for youth aging out and the impact this has on outcomes (Collins & Curtis, 2011). Collins and Curtis (2011) argue in their review and conceptualization of housing for youth aging out that housing needs to be a greater research priority. In a review of literature on housing and youth aging out, Curry and Abrams (2014) call for research to examine how youth secure housing and deal with housing insecurity following leaving care. There is a need to understand how housing interventions work for youth aging out.

Broadly it is recognized that knowledge about housing interventions is insufficient and more research is needed (e.g., Newman, 2008; Bassuk, DeCandia, Tsertsvadze, & Richard, 2014). Providing housing interventions to address homelessness and poverty started as a practice in the United States since the 1930s and have been found to increase various health outcomes and self-sufficiency (Newman, 2008). The housing first model, which provides housing to individuals experiencing problems such as mental health or substance misuse without any treatment prerequisites, are increasingly recognized as effective practices (e.g., Padgett, Stanhope, Henwood, & Stefancic, 2011; Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004). Despite the popularity of providing housing as an intervention, there have been concerns raised about the ability of housing interventions to increase long-term stability and employment at livable wages (Bassuk et al., 2014).

1.3. Qualitative research with youth aging out

A decade ago, a review of the qualitative literature of child welfare found it limited and coverage of youth aging out nearly non-existent (Fox & Berrick, 2007). Since then, there has been an increase in qualitative research with youth aging out that contributes to understand youths' perceptions and experiences (e.g., Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). However, there are limited ethnographic studies of youth aging out of the child welfare system although ethnography has the potential to deepen the understanding of youths' experiences leaving care (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Stein, 2006).

Ethnography considers larger context and can examine the daily experiences of youth aging out. The in-depth examination which seeks to capture youths' experiences can delve into constructs researchers may not previously have known existed. This ethnography examines experiences of youth aging out in a subsidized housing program referred to as A Spot of My Own (ASOMO) and explores challenges related to addressing youths' housing needs. This study seeks to provide a better understanding of the daily lives of youth aging out in a subsidized housing program as they transition out of care and into adulthood. The knowledge gained can contribute to the theoretical understanding of how youth aging out negotiate the transition out of the child welfare system and into adulthood and how services can assist in the transitions.

2. Method

Data are drawn from a larger ethnography of youth aging out of the child welfare system exploring how youth negotiate the transition out of care in a mid-Atlantic urban county in the United States (See Schelbe, 2013). The study data include detailed fieldnotes from over 200 hours of observation with 19 youth in ASOMO and both of the ASOMO service providers and 11 transcripts from interviews with six youth and two ASOMO service providers. I collected data from fall 2010 to spring 2011. The University of Pittsburgh institutional review board approved and the Director of the county's Department of Human Service (DHS) supported the study.

2.1. Setting

ASOMO is a "scattered-site" housing program for youth ages 18 to 24 who have aged out of the child welfare system. The program, primarily funded through DHS, provides one-bedroom apartments throughout the city and the surrounding area for up to two years. Two service providers, both of whom hold graduate degrees, work within ASOMO which is part of a larger agency serving people across several counties through multiple programs with the goal of providing safe and affordable housing. Started in 2010, ASOMO was the newest program of the agency which had existed for over 50 years. Youth in ASOMO pay 30% of their net income as a program fee for their apartment and utilities. To be eligible to participate in ASOMO, youth must be either homeless or at risk of being homeless as documented by a service provider. ASOMO requires youth to be employed and pursuing education goals such as completing the general educational development (GED) test, attending community college, or pursuing a bachelor's degree. Case management and life skills classes are provided to youth through ASOMO service providers. The intention of providing subsidized apartments to youth for two years is that, at the end of the program, youth could either assume the full responsibility of the rent and utilities and take over the lease or move to a different unsubsidized apartment. Data collection began as the first youth were accepted into ASOMO and concluded as these youth left two years later.

2.2. Participants

As I was conceptualizing the larger ethnographic study, I met with the ASOMO service providers, and their support and interest in the study served as an impetus for selecting ASOMO for a data collection site. From the beginning of the study, both ASOMO service providers were committed to being in the study. ASOMO service providers recruited the study participants through introducing all of the youth to the study and distributing business cards that contained my phone number and email. When I was at the agency to observe trainings or meetings, service providers would send youth with questions about the study directly to me. Service providers explained the purpose of the study was to understand how youth negotiated leaving the child welfare system. Interested youth contacted me to discuss the study and I answered their questions. Involvement in the study was voluntary.

The capacity of ASOMO was 20 apartments, but over the data collection period, more youth were involved with ASOMO due to early termination. Almost all youth in ASOMO were receptive to being in the study, although difficulties with scheduling sometimes prevented their involvement in the study. Any youth who provided consent was included in the study. Study participants include 19 youth in ASOMO and both of the ASOMO service providers. All youth in the study had been in the child welfare system on their 16th birthday, had been in an out-of-home placement, and consented to participate in the study. Youth were between the ages of 18 and 22 when I first met them. They were predominantly African American with only two of the youth identifying as white. Ten of the youth were young women and nine were young men. Most of them had graduated from high school and all were employed at

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