



A transitional housing program for older foster youth: How do youth fare after exiting?

Sonja Lenz-Rashid*

San Francisco State University, United States



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study is an outcome evaluation of Bay Area Youth Center's Real Alternatives for Adolescents (RAFA) transitional housing program in Hayward, California.

Methods: This study examined a sample of 55 youth ages 16 to 21 who lived in the RAFA transitional program between 2007 and 2015.

Results: About 96% were in residing in stable housing at follow up, there were low rates of parenting before age 22 (41% of females and 16% of males) when compared with other similar studies, and 86% were employed earning, on average, \$15.69 per hour at follow-up. Also, there were lower rates of receipt of SSI, food stamps and TANF income support when compared to foster youth in other studies.

Conclusions: In vivo housing experiences in transitional housing programs can lead to successful outcomes for foster youth as they move to adulthood.

1. Introduction

Nationwide about 23,000 youth exit foster care because they reach adulthood (Valentine et al., 2015) and in California alone, approximately 4300 exit the foster care system annually at the age of 21 (Webster et al., 2017). The child welfare practice and research communities know well that former foster care youth struggle with the transition to adulthood and independence. In fact, youth aging out of care face additional challenges compared with youth who have grown up in long-lasting, consistent family settings (Trejos-Castillo et al., 2015, p. 54).

A growing body of research links “aging out” of foster care with housing problems in the transition to adulthood (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). In addition to marginal housing, little connection to parenting figures, lack of savings, under or unemployment, low of educational attainment, early parenting, receipt of public assistance, and behavioral health problems are all reasons why youth may be challenged with the transition. Yet, when foster youth turn 18—or, in some states, 21—they lose access to the housing, financial, educational, and social supports provided through the child welfare system (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). Several factors—including an evolving understanding of normative development, growing knowledge about the diverse needs of foster youth, and changing views of the state's role and responsibilities as parent when children are removed from home—are leading policy-makers to reassess how to support young people transitioning from

foster care to independence (Peters et al., 2009, p. 1).

States are now focused on helping older foster youth move to independence by offering funding for transitional housing, which can include additional services such as independent living skills training, case management, mental health therapy, employment preparation, and educational support. Most states now offer funding for transitional housing providers to house foster youth ages 18 to 21, and in some cases up to age 25, so they may age out of the foster care system with increased life skills, money saved, high school diploma/earned college credits, and some employment experience or job skills. And, the hope is that these positive outcomes continue over time for these young people.

1.1. Purpose of the study

This study examines supportive transitional housing for older foster youth as a possible preventative intervention against future homelessness, unemployment, lack of educational attainment, receipt of public assistance, and early parenting. Although there is a plethora of research on the outcomes of the general population of youth leaving foster care, the research on transitional living programs includes few rigorous evaluations, most of which do not find positive results (Valentine et al., 2015, p. 3). Also, there has been little research examining outcomes of transitional housing programs offering “in vivo” experiences, to prevent future negative outcomes for former foster youth. In vivo housing experiences are those where youth are living in

* Corresponding author at: 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132, United States.
E-mail address: srlenz@sfsu.edu.

actual apartments versus foster homes or congregate care.

This study is a descriptive evaluation exploring the outcomes of current, older foster youth served by a supportive housing program in the San Francisco Bay Area. Below are the research questions, which were extrapolated from the seminal Midwest studies by Chapin Hall (see Courtney et al., 2011):

- What percentage of youth were in stable housing and/or employed at follow-up?
- What percentage of youth were parents at follow-up?
- What was the educational attainment of youth at follow-up?
- What was the percentage of youth who had received public assistance at follow-up?
- What is the perspective of the youth in terms of the helpfulness of RAFA's services?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Outcomes for foster youth aging out

Studies over the last twenty years have shown that former foster youth are challenged with most aspects of early adulthood: maintaining stable housing, obtaining and keeping employment, staying enrolled in higher education settings, and/or managing mental health difficulties (see Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2011; Goerge et al., 2002; Jonson-Reid and Barth, 2000; Needell et al., 2002). These outcomes have often been examined at point-in-time at exit, but some studies have followed youth longitudinally, up to age 26 (see Courtney et al., 2011).

Recently there has been a fundamental shift toward greater federal responsibility for supporting foster youth during the transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2016, p. 10). For a few decades, federal policy was focused on preparing foster youth with training programs that taught independent living skills, even though there was little evidence demonstrating benefit of these programs (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). Most counties first provided Independent Living Skills services under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (which was the first federal law that offered \$45 million in funding, and actual disbursement first occurring in 1987) to support state and county delivery of independent living skills services. However, it was generally unknown how effective those services were at preparing foster youth for independent living and no comprehensive outcome studies were conducted.

After fifteen years of gradual ILSP expansion, the Foster Care Independence Act (Public Law 16–169), was passed and renamed the program the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Sommer, 2013, p. 5). The Chafee Act increased the level of federal funding to \$140 million a year, further expanded ILSP eligibility to all youth in foster care (not just those eligible for federally-funded welfare), and provided a state option to provide ILSP services to all youth likely to remain in care until age 21, thereby removing the minimum age requirement (Foster and Gifford, 2005). But, even with the ILSP expansion, there remained dismal outcomes for youth aging out of foster care at age 18 – in all aspects of the transition to adulthood.

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed in 2008 (H.R. 6893/P.L. 110–351) and had one significant provision that allowed states to receive federal reimbursement for costs associated with supporting foster youth in care up to age 21. Illinois was the first state in the nation to let youth to remain in care until age 21, and between 2008 and 2017 twenty-four other states, and the District of Columbia, have passed similar legislation. California is arguably the most important early adopter of the new policy (called Assembly Bill 12 or AB 12) as it has the largest state foster care population in the country, lending national significance to what happens in California's child welfare system (Fowler et al., 2017, p.10). Youth who choose to stay in foster care until age 21 in California are

called Non-Minor Dependents (NMDs).

Studies have found that outcomes for foster youth have been shown to improve if they are able to stay in care until age 21 (see Courtney et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2009). The seminal Midwest study found that former foster youth from Illinois, where young people could remain in care until their 21st birthday, were twice as likely to have ever attended college and more than twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college by age 21 compared with former foster youth from Iowa and Wisconsin, where remaining in care beyond 18 was not an option (Courtney et al., 2007). And, Courtney et al. (2016) found that when comparing California youth who stayed in care until age 21 to those who chose not to remain in care, those in care were less likely to be homeless.

2.2. History of housing for foster youth

Policymakers fear abrupt disruption of services at age 18 combined with chaotic family environments, in the face of developmentally normative experimentation, leave many foster youth highly vulnerable to homelessness (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). In most states there are now a variety of housing options available for older youth in foster care, ages 16 to 21. Over the last fifteen years there have been various funding streams to pay for housing options for older foster care youth besides traditional foster homes, group homes and kinship placements. After examining 60 different state and local programs providing housing or housing assistance for older foster care youth, Dworsky and Dion (2014) were able to categorize the main types of housing programs into one of three broad groups: (1) programs that provide single-site housing and a high level of supervision and support, (2) programs that provide scattered-site housing or rental assistance and a low level of supervision, and (3) programs that provide more than one type of housing with different levels of supervision (p.1). There is also housing support for former foster care youth through HUD's Family Unification Program (FUP), and this housing is usually provided via local Public Housing Authorities.

In California, THPP is a transitional housing placement opportunity for foster youth and youth on probation who are at least 16 and not more than 18, who are currently in the child welfare system (Childsworld, 2010). The program's goal is to provide a safe living environment so youth can practice the skills necessary to live on their own upon leaving the foster care support system. The program provides supervised transitional living housing and supportive services based on a youth's Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP). Each TILP is developed by the foster youth and other supportive persons, and details the youth's goals and objectives while working toward self-sufficiency. A transitional housing placement provider that provides a THPP program is licensed under the California Health and Safety Code Sections 1502(a)(1), 1503.5(a) and 1559.110. THPPs are funded with federal, state, and county funds. Participants may live alone or, with departmental approval, with roommates in apartments and single family dwellings or in a host family model. The youth are also supported by THPP contracted agency staff, county social workers, and Independent Living Skills Coordinators (Childsworld, 2010).

THP-Plus (THP + FC) Foster Care is another California transitional housing option for older foster care youth that are NMDs. THP + FC is a licensed placement for youth, ages 18–20 who are participating in extended foster care made available by AB 12. THP + FC providers offer housing and comprehensive supportive services (e.g., case management, educational support, employment preparation, counseling, etc.) until the youth's 21st birthday. THP + FC providers are certified by public county departments of social services agencies and licensed as Transitional Housing Placement Providers by the Community Care Licensing (CCL) Division of the California Department of Social Services. In 2017 there were 137 housing providers in 48 counties (out of 58) throughout California that served 1661 youth in THP + FC housing (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2017).

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