



The experience with independent living services for youth in care and those formerly in care

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ABSTRACT

A significant amount of attention has been paid to the experiences of young people who have spent time in foster care. Policies and programs have focused on providing independent living services to youth currently in care and services to those who were formerly in foster care but are living independently. The purpose of this study was to describe the receipt of independent living services of youth who were formerly in care and who are currently living independently, while also looking at the skills and resources of youth who are currently in foster care. This study drew from a national data set, The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II (NSCAW II) and included both former youth ($n = 127$) and those currently in care ($n = 106$). While most former youth reported possessing documents associated with independent living, a significant portion reported a lack of several resources that aid in independent living. Youth currently in care did not report the majority of skills associated with living independently. Additionally, most youth denied the receipt of resources needed for obtaining those skills through independent living services. Implications for practice and policy, as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Almost half of a million children are in the foster care system at any given point, and of the 243,000 children who exited foster care in 2015, approximately 9% did so through emancipation or “aging out” of the system (USDHHS, 2015). This adds up to nearly 25,000 youth per year who age out and live on their own. Additionally, a significant portion of young adults may have spent time in foster care at some point, particularly in populations who experience a range of psychosocial issues. For example, between 10 and 17% of young adults who engaged in risky sexual behaviors or were adolescent mothers have reported a history of foster care placement (Putnam-Hornstein, Cederbaum, King, Cleveland, & Needell, 2013; Surratt & Kurtz, 2012). Others also have found that between 28 and 35% of homeless adults have spent some time in foster care as a child (Hudson & Nandy, 2012; Patterson, Moniruzzaman, & Somers, 2015; Thompson & Hasin, 2012). The federal government and individual states have implemented independent living services for youth in foster care and those transitioning into adulthood. However, little is known about the number of current foster youth receiving these services, nor is there a snapshot of how many youth formerly in care but living independently received these important services.

1.1. Experiences of youth formerly in foster care

Youth who have spent time in foster care and youth who have aged out face multiple challenges as they transition into adulthood, and they frequently do not fare as well as the general population of youth entering adulthood. In general, youth in foster care commonly lack parental support or experience low self-esteem, which can translate into lower educational goals and achievement (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2013). All youth formerly in care share a heightened risk of inadequate access to health care, involvement with the criminal justice system, becoming incarcerated, living in poverty, becoming pregnant unexpectedly, experiencing homelessness, or having difficulty obtaining employment (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Courtney et al., 2007; Love, McIntosh, Rosst, & Tertzakian, 2005). Additionally, Okpych and Courtney (2017) found that almost 50% of a sample of young adults age 16–20 in California who had spent time in foster care were diagnosed with a mental health or substance abuse disorder.

Other studies explicitly interested in youth who have aged out of foster care have found similar outcomes with limited healthcare access, criminal justice involvement, and employment difficulty (Greeson,

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Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). Youth who have exited the foster care system might also find it difficult to obtain safe and cost-efficient housing (Okpych, 2012), and they oftentimes rely on public assistance (Pecora et al., 2006). This can be particularly concerning given other needs they may face. For example, youth formerly in foster care are likely to experience problematic mental and physical health outcomes (Pecora et al., 2006; Scannapieco et al., 2007). The combined challenges of exiting foster care, transitioning to adulthood, managing personal well-being, and lacking the level of support available to non-foster youth is a large endeavor.

1.2. Overview of independent living policies & services

Policies have been enacted over the past quarter of a century in hopes of providing services to a range of youth who have experienced time in foster care, both prior to age 18 and after emancipation (Stott, 2013). Independent living services for youth are intended to help them become self-sufficient as they reach the age of maturation. The aim of independent living services is to assist youth who may be at risk for various struggles during this transition (Collins, 2001). Independent living services include a range of coordinated programs that are aimed at assisting youth in gaining self-sufficiency, such as housing, employment, education, and personal care needs. Additionally, it is generally assumed that youth receive important documents such as a birth certificate and social security card (NCSL, n.d.).

Independent living services are funded by the Social Security Act, and states are required to offer independent living services to those youth age 16 and over (Social Security Administration, 2014). However, there is no minimum age in which children can receive services. Each state has the responsibility of developing, providing, and coordinating independent living services for youth in their state. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), created under the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA), offers various programs to help youth obtain independent living services (OPRE, n.d.; Children's Bureau, 2012). The creation of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program resulted in increased funding to states to develop and improve independent living services and allow states the option to extend independent living services to the age of 21. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 allowed states to use Social Security Act funds for the provision of independent living services up to the age of 21 (Katz & Courtney, 2015).

Despite the increase in attention to youth who have spent time in care, current policies aimed at helping transitioning youth are limited in their scope and improvements and adjustments should be considered (Stott, 2013). It is possible that some youth are not receiving services either while in care or post-emancipation. In a recent study, Barnow et al. (2015) evaluated services that were found to be most helpful to youth as they transitioned out of care. Youth reported that job preparation skills, transportation, childcare, educational services, and overall life skills were most important for working toward their educational and employment goals. Most youth also reported that an individualized plan to meet their specialized needs was an important aspect of independent living services (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Scannapieco et al., 2007).

Policies such as the Fostering Connections Act and Foster Care Independence Act have tried to address the self-sufficiency needs of youth who leave the foster care system, but there are multiple limitations. For example, coverage under the Foster Care Independence Act and Medicaid often end at age 21, and many youth find the Foster Care Independence Act disbursements insufficient for meeting their housing needs (Okpych, 2012). In addition, although many states have extended foster care to age 21, allowing extra time for youth to prepare for adulthood, youth often leave foster care immediately after their 18th birthday (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009). These youths have reported leaving foster care due to misinformation or misunderstanding about

extended foster care and the desire for autonomy and independence (Goodkind, Shelbe, & Shook, 2011). It appears as though both structural issues, such as inadequate supports, as well as individual-level reasons, such as not having access to needed resources, may influence the transition of former foster youth into adulthood. More research is needed to understand and validate the experiences of youth during the transition to adulthood after placement in foster care.

1.3. Independent living services

The research on independent living programs is somewhat limited. Several studies from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation collected data from various states in regard to independent living services of current and former foster youth (Courtney, Zinn, Johnson, & Malm, 2011; Courtney, Zinn, Zielewski, Bess, & Malm, 2008; McDaniel & Pergamit, 2013; Pergamit, 2012). This was part of the mandate from the Foster Care Independence Act for states to report data on these youth to a national database. However, these youth only resided within California, Massachusetts, and the Midwest. Katz and Courtney (2015) assessed the needs of youth formerly in foster care using data from Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin and found that almost 30% of youth in this study reported at least one unmet independent living need related to finances, housing, health, education, employment, life skills, or relationships. While it is the only large-scale longitudinal study to examine transition age youth, it is limited to youth within these three states.

Yelick (2017) completed a systematic review of independent living programs. Only six studies were found that addressed outcomes related to education, employment, housing, mental health, and independent living skills. Overall, this study found inconsistent and disheartening results in regard to how youth are prepared for self-sufficiency. Okpych (2015) reported on 13 Chafee independent living programs and found great variation in regard to independent living services accessed and received by former youth. The variation in services received after youth live independently also highlights the need to understand their experience with independent living services prior to living on their own. While some studies have evaluated the skills and needs of youth formerly in foster care, no known study to date has reported the skills and resources associated with independent living of a national sample.

1.4. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the receipt of independent living services of youth who were formerly in care and who are currently living independently, as well as the skills and resources of youth who are currently in foster care. Materials included four specific identification-oriented materials to help youth function as an adult. Resources included services, materials, or other physical supports needed in order to progress to the level of autonomy required of youth who are living on their own. Skills related to specific abilities gained through educational seminars or coaching that are needed to function as an independent adult. The specific research questions include: (1) What independent living materials and resources do youth formerly in foster care system and live independently have? (2) What specific independent living skills and resources do youth currently in foster care report?

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This descriptive study utilized data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II (NSCAW-II, 2011), a national longitudinal study designed to identify and categorize the experiences and service needs of children and families that interact with the child welfare system. The entire dataset includes 5872 children from birth

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