



Evaluating the self-expressed unmet needs of emancipated foster youth over time



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the self-reported unmet need for independent living services of young people making the transition to adulthood from foster care after the creation of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. We find that 34.5% of youth indicated that they had an independent living service need that went unmet at age 17, 27.9% at age 21 and 35.5% at age 23, with the largest percentage indicating they lacked preparation in the area of finance. Some of these youth expressed unmet need consistently while others' expression of unmet need fluctuated over time. Youth who indicated that they had mental health issues were significantly more likely to report unmet need at baseline and wave 3. Youth who indicated that they received more social support and independent living services were less likely to report unmet need at baseline and wave 3. These youth perspectives could lead to the enhancement of existing independent living skill provision as states prepare to extend the age of foster care benefits, ultimately making them more timely and effective.

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1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood is a sudden one for youth who age-out of the foster care system. Upon turning 18 years old (or, in some states, 21 years old), foster youth become emancipated from the guardianship of the state with the expectation that they will be able to effectively provide for themselves as independent adults. While young adults outside of the foster care system can lean on their parents for support in areas such as finance and housing, foster youth tend to enter independent life without prerequisite skills in these areas, without knowledge of resources available to them, and without familial support. It's no surprise that these teenagers and young adults have historically found themselves in great need; their struggles have been widely documented in the literature (see, e.g., Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Courtney, 2009; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Courtney et al., 2011a; Havlicek, 2011; Mares, 2010; Pecora et al., 2003).

In an attempt to ameliorate this need, the Federal Government established the Independent Living Program in 1986 as an amendment to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. Funding was given to states with the expectation that they would establish programs to help prepare teens and young adults for the transition to independent life. Further federal support was given in 1999 when the Foster Care Independence Act authorized the creation of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. This resulted in the doubling of amount of money available to states and gave states greater discretion in spending. The Chafee Program also

granted states the option of extending independent living services (and Medicaid coverage) until youth turned 21. The need for continuing support after age 18 has since been reaffirmed; with the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act in 2008, Title IV-E was amended to include federal reimbursement for costs of foster care payments at state option until qualifying youth are 21 years of age. This reimbursement became available beginning in the federal fiscal year of 2011.

As a result of these advances, many youth who are aging out of foster care receive some form of independent living services prior to emancipation, however the types of services differ significantly by state (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009; USGAO, 2004). Some agencies offer teen-specific foster care programs, aimed specifically to target the needs of older foster youth and prepare them for independent living. However, despite the focus on this issue in child welfare policy over the past twenty-five years, teens continue to report that they have trouble transitioning to adulthood. The study reported here explores the self-reported unmet need for services of young people making the transition to adulthood from foster care after the creation of the Chafee Program. Specifically, it examines the level and nature of unmet need, trends in unmet need between age 17 and 21, the relationship between expressed unmet need and various youth characteristics, and whether youth who report receiving more independent living preparation are less likely to report having needs that went unmet by their agency. Before describing the study and its findings, we turn to a review of relevant prior research.

2. Background

There have been a handful of small qualitative studies done to examine the troubles that older youth in foster care and those making the

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transition to adulthood face and their needs that continue to go unmet. While these studies have only interviewed small groups of young adults who have become emancipated, the needs they have expressed have emerged somewhat thematically.

Youth who were interviewed have expressed concern about the provision of effective case management services (Barth, 1990; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Mares, 2010; McMillen, Rideout, Fisher, & Tucker, 1997; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). These youth tend to feel as though foster care case management services are disorganized and impersonal (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Mares, 2010; Scannapieco et al., 2007), providing little benefit in the preparation for independent life. They alternatively suggested that the ideal caseworker/client relationship has the potential to protect against various risks associated with aging out, and provide them with critical support and knowledge. Geenen and Powers (2007) found that the youth they interviewed called for a single, long-standing case management relationship with a worker who crafted an individualized transition plan to meet their unique needs. The need for individualized transition planning was echoed in a similar study conducted by Scannapieco et al. (2007). The teens in this study hoped that a personal relationship with their caseworker would allow for greater inclusion of their perspective and wishes in transition planning. They conceived of optimal case management as an ongoing, cooperative, creative endeavor, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all agency requirement.

Youth tended to have more success in developing mentor-like relationships and securing useful services in the context of independent living programs (ILP). McMillen et al. (1997) found that ILP classes were places where youth could come together and form relationships with each other and with group facilitators. Mares (2010) found that the youth he interviewed were generally interested in the content delivered in independent living classes, and that they also tended to enjoy the opportunity to connect with other emancipating youth. Youth in a different study (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002) found similar benefits, but expressed that they believed these ILP classes should happen closer to the time of their transition out of foster care (as opposed to years prior). Further, the youth interviewed in the Iglehart & Becerra study all identified as people of color; they called for the involvement of former foster youth of color and suggested they play a formalized peer educator role in the ILS curriculum.

Independent Living Programs tend to offer trainings in a variety of areas, however some appear to be more relevant than others. Teens have reported that there is a particular need for financial skill instruction, particularly in the area of money management i.e. budgeting, using a checkbook, comparison-shopping, building credit and financial goal setting (Barth, 1990; Mares, 2010; McMillen et al., 1997; Scannapieco et al., 2007). There was also a focus on the importance of developing skills in the process of locating and transitioning to independent housing (Barth, 1990; McMillen et al., 1997). Training on topics such as birth control and cooking were seen as useful (McMillen et al., 1997). There also appeared to be an interest in and need for training in the area of locating useful community resources and programs (McMillen et al., 1997; Scannapieco et al., 2007).

While the acquisition of these hard skills is important to success, teens also call for a focus on the development of soft skills that focus on self and interpersonal awareness. Youth expressed a need for support groups and independent psychotherapeutic treatment to help them cope with the transition to independent living (Scannapieco et al., 2007). They are also interested in personal relationship development and preservation (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002). They tend to believe that caseworkers or counselors may be people with whom they may be able to develop long-term mentoring relationships, and from whom they could learn these soft skills.

Foster parents were also identified by these teens as potential mentors and informal trainers. Foster youth have often developed strong, long-standing relationships with their foster parents (Barth, 1990) and feel as though these parents would be the most appropriate source

of training and support for independent living (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Mares, 2010; McMillen et al., 1997; Scannapieco et al., 2007). Foster homes are an ideal setting for both hard and soft skills training because there are likely many daily opportunities for foster youth to see how foster parents manage their finances, tend to their households, and participate in relationships with their friends and family members.

When considering the perspectives of foster youth and the professionals that serve them regarding the characteristics of potentially effective independent living services, it is important to keep in mind that extant evaluation research has found very limited evidence of the effectiveness of these services (Courtney, Zinn, Johnson, & Malm, 2011; Courtney et al., 2008; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006) or how often these services are, in fact, offered at all. Courtney, Lee, and Perez (2011b) using data from the current study ($n = 732$) demonstrate that most youth who are aging-out of foster care are receiving far fewer services than they qualify for under the Chafee Act. At ages 17 and 18, they report receiving approximately 30% of the services to which this federal legislation states they are entitled. Further, there are significant differences in experiences and demographic characteristics of those who report receiving more services: (1) those who report receiving more services before age 17 or 18 are likely to continue to report receiving services at later ages; (2) after age 17, youth who remain in care longer are more likely to report receiving independent living services than those who leave earlier; (3) those who are in group care shortly before emancipation are more likely to receive independent living services than their counterparts in family foster care, especially in the area of employment, which may be a result of the contractual obligation group care staff have to provide said services; (4) African Americans were more likely to receive education-related skills than their white counterparts and (5) males tend to report getting fewer services than their female counterparts, which may be due to their higher levels of incarceration.

Nevertheless, as states prepare to extend the age of foster care benefits, the consideration of youths' perspectives could lead to the enhancement of existing independent living services, ultimately making them more timely and effective.

3. Research questions

Findings of prior research provide an important, albeit incomplete, picture of the independent living skills acquisition of youth aging out of the foster care system. In particular, the majority of existing studies rely on small convenience samples, contributing to questionable generalizability of their findings, despite their general consistency. It is unclear whether these same observations would emerge in a much larger and more representative sample. Moreover, it remains unclear how perceptions of need would change over time as youth encounter different challenges associated with independent living, since prior research has examined need at a point in time. It is also unclear whether or not these trends would vary in accordance with certain youth characteristics and experiences. The identification of these previously unexplored areas of scholarship contributed to the following four research questions:

1. What percentage of youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care identify unmet needs in their preparation for independent living? In what domains do perceived unmet needs fall?
2. To what extent do expressed needs change over time? Do youth who initially express no unmet need come up against unforeseen challenges as they age that lead them to conclude that they do, in fact, have needs that were unmet by their child welfare agency?
3. Is there a relationship between expressed need and various youth characteristics?
4. Are youth who report receiving more independent living preparation significantly less likely to report having needs that went unmet by their agency?

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