



# Re-entry among former foster youth in early adulthood: Findings from Illinois



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## ABSTRACT

On January 1, 2010, the Foster Youth Successful Transition to Adulthood Act went into effect in the state of Illinois to legally permit former foster youth who are at least 18 years old and not yet 21 years old to voluntarily re-engage with child welfare agencies and juvenile court to receive Supporting Emancipated Youth Services. Not much is known about the number or characteristics of foster youth who have taken advantage of this new opportunity to receive support following a hardship. This study used administrative data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) to describe foster youth who have legally re-entered out-of-home care after exiting through emancipation. Findings revealed that a low number of former foster youth re-entered out-of-home care. This article discusses possible explanations for why so few youth have re-entered out-of-home care when research suggests they may be at increased risk for making the transition to adulthood.

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## 1. Introduction

Numerous studies suggest that foster youth who reach the age of majority in out-of-home care are at risk of experiencing a variety of hardships after emancipation, including unemployment, unstable housing, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). One way states have sought to better support the needs of foster youth in the transition to adulthood is to extend eligibility to remain in out-of-home care from age 18 to 21. In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) (hereafter referred to as the Fostering Connections Act) extended eligibility for federally subsidized out-of-home care up to age 21 for Title-IV-E eligible youth who are either: (1) completing high school or in an equivalency program; (2) enrolled in a postsecondary or vocational school; (3) working 80 hours per month; (4) enrolled in a program designed to promote work; or (5) determined to be ineligible for work or education due to a medical condition. Since the Fostering Connections Act went into effect on October 1, 2010, twenty states have received an approved or pending plan to extend federally funded out-of-home care to youth who are at least 18 years old but not yet 21 years old (Administration for Children & Families, 2013; cf Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Yet, not all youth who are eligible to remain in out-of-home care past age 18

elect to do so (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; McCoy et al., 2008; Peters, Bell, Zinn, Goerge, & Courtney, 2008). Study findings that identify multiple risks among young people exiting out-of-home care early (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; McCoy et al., 2008) call for increased understanding of existing approaches for supporting youth when hardships occur.

In addition to extending federally subsidized foster past age 18, the Fostering Connections Act also extends eligibility for federally funded out-of-home care to former foster youth who leave and then return to out-of-home care after attaining age 18 (Administration for Children & Families, 2010). Nineteen states and the District of Columbia have passed laws to formally permit former foster youth to voluntarily re-engage with child welfare systems and re-enter out-of-home care up to the maximum age set forth by a state (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013).<sup>2</sup> To date, no studies have examined the number of foster youth who have taken advantage of these new policies. Greater consideration of the frequency and characteristics of foster youth who voluntarily return to care may shed light on the ways in which child welfare systems engage foster youth and include youths' perspectives in the policies and services that are designed to address their needs.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine re-entry policy targeting emancipating foster youth in the state of Illinois. Drawing from Illinois state administrative data, three main questions are addressed. First, how many former foster youth return to out-of-home

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<sup>1</sup> There are also a few states that have extended foster care, but not to age 21.

<sup>2</sup> These states include Alabama, Arkansas, California, District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia.

care when given the opportunity to do so? Second, what individual, maltreatment history, and out-of-home care experiences distinguish foster youth returning to out-of-home care from their peers who exit before age 21 and do not re-enter? Third, what happens to former foster youth once they return to out-of-home care?

This study comes at a time when the parental home has increasingly come to represent a critical safety net for young adults in the general population, with more young adults staying or returning home in early adulthood (Goldschneider & Goldschneider, 1999). According to the 2012 U.S. Census, 56% of adults between the ages of 18 and 24 were living with one or both parents (Fry, 2013). This type of extended co-residence may have benefits in the form of emotional and concrete supports (Mitchell, 2008). Given that one of the intentions of the Fostering Connections Act is to provide foster youth with developmental opportunities that are similar to same-aged peers in the general population, it is critical to understand how re-entry policies are meeting the developmental needs of foster youth who emancipate from out-of-home care.

## 2. Background

During fiscal year 2012, 23,396 youth exited out-of-home care through emancipation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013a). As state child welfare caseloads have declined during the past decade in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013b), the percentage of foster youth exiting out-of-home care through emancipation increased from 7% in 2001 to 10% in 2012 (Administration for Children & Families, 2013). While services exist to prepare young people in out-of-home care for making the transition to adulthood, not all foster youth report receiving the services for which they are eligible (Courtney, Lee, & Perez, 2011). Among those who do, there is limited evidence of effectiveness in improving outcomes related to employment, education, and independent living (Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008a, 2008b; U.S. Government Accounting Office, 2004), and there is growing consensus for the importance of genuinely engaging foster youth in the policy and service decisions that contribute to their prospects in adulthood (Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008a, 2008b).

When asked foster youth describe the limited attention that services often give to addressing a holistic set of needs (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014; Day et al., 2012; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Vocational training programs may target skills for employment without giving consideration to mental health needs, or past exposure to trauma (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010). Similarly, educational interventions, such as tutoring, may target individual foster youth without including their teachers or caregivers in planning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008a). It may also be that the absence of foster youths' perspectives in the services and programs that are offered to them plays a contributing role in service withdrawal and disconnection (Geenen & Powers, 2006; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Hyde & Kammerer, 2009). This may be particularly true among those foster youth deemed by service providers to be the most challenging to serve (Whittaker, 2009).

One group of foster youth who may present challenges to service providers may be those foster youth who exit out-of-home care early despite being given the option to remain. In Illinois, where extended out-of-home care has been available long before the passage of the Fostering Connections Act, one study found that foster youth who exited care before age 19 were two times more likely to meet diagnostic criteria for depression or alcohol abuse, three times more likely to have a substance abuse disorder, and two times more likely to have been hospitalized in the past year or convicted of a crime as compared to peers who were still in out-of-home care (Courtney & Dworsky,

2005). These findings support the results from a study in Missouri, where McCoy et al. (2008) reported that foster youth who exited out-of-home care before age 21 were more likely to have a history of juvenile detention, running away, alcohol consumption, marijuana use, and placement instability compared to peers who remained in out-of-home care.

Very little is known about why some foster youth leave early despite being given the option of remaining in out-of-home care for longer periods. Potential clues come from a handful of qualitative studies seeking to understand youths' perspectives. In one study, participants described the frustration that came from not receiving services that were perceived of as being critical to make a successful transition to adulthood (McCoy et al., 2008). Many jurisdictions, particularly those outside of urban areas, may have few services to offer foster youth (Heflinger & Hoffman, 2009). Two additional qualitative studies reveal the ways in which leaving out-of-home care may be viewed by some foster youth as moving away from being dependent on state support (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) to becoming independent adults (Berzin et al., 2014). From the perspective of foster youth, leaving out-of-home care early may therefore be viewed as one powerful way to increase opportunities for self-determination and normalcy (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Hyde & Kammerer, 2009).

While the above reasons suggest that a decision to leave care is planned or purposeful, not all foster youth describe being aware of the reasons they exited care (McCoy et al., 2008). Prior research suggests that courts may play a large role in keeping youth in care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). However, among courts operating under the same governing statutes (Peters, 2012) or in the same courthouse (Zinn & Cusick, 2014), studies reveal wide regional variation in court advocacy and practice with respect to decisions made about behavior of children in out-of-home care. Of particular concern is that caseworkers and other advocates agree that foster youth are often uninformed of their inability to access supports after emancipation (Geenen & Powers, 2007) and once youth exit care many may be resistant to seeking out and receiving supports when unmet needs persist (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

### 2.1. Reentry Among Former Foster Youth

Only one study has systematically asked state independent living coordinators about the circumstances under which youth are permitted to re-enter care. This survey was conducted before the Fostering Connections Act was passed into law (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2008). A review of the circumstances under which states at the time permitted foster youth to re-enter out-of-home care underscores the wide variation across states in policy and practice models of re-entry with respect to waiting periods, court-system involvement, voluntary agreements, eligibility requirements, and restrictions placed on youth. Former foster youth in Arizona, for example, must go through a 90-day stabilization period prior to re-entering care, whereas in Texas, re-entry is dependent upon the availability of licensed placements, which may be few for transition-aged foster youth (Han, 2009). In New York state foster youth may only re-enter care when no other reasonable alternative exists though more recent amendments to re-entry policy require local child welfare departments to provide notice of the legal right to request a petition in court to return to care, provided a youth is under the age of 21 (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2011). The extent to which these different re-entry policies are successfully engaging former foster youth who are facing hardship is not well understood.

To develop knowledge in this area, the current study examined re-entry in the state of Illinois using administrative data from IDCFs. Since the state's Foster Youth Successful Transition to Adulthood Act went into effect on January 1, 2010, former foster youth who are at least 18 years old and not yet 21 years old and who encountered significant hardship upon emancipation have been able to voluntarily re-engage with IDCFs and juvenile court to receive Supporting Emancipated Youth Services.

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