



Public assistance receipt among older youth exiting foster care



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ABSTRACT

There is increasing evidence that youth aging out of the foster care system encounter substantial challenges in their transition to adulthood. Receipt of public assistance following discharge from care is one important indicator of the extent to which these youth experience economic difficulties, but prior research on the topic has a number of key limitations. Building on existing research, this study examines public assistance receipt following exit from care among a cohort of 7492 youth who were discharged from an out of home placement in Los Angeles County between 2002 and 2004 and who were aged 16 or above at their time of discharge. Results show that approximately 28% of youth in the study sample received either CalWORKs, which is California's version of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, or General Relief (GR), which is LA County's general assistance program for indigent adults, at some point over the study's follow-up period. Additionally, "crossover youth," who have a history of involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are more likely than their counterparts who were only involved in the child welfare system to receive both types of public assistance. Differences in the risk profiles for GR and CalWORKs receipt centered around gender, as males were far less likely to receive CalWORKs but more likely to receive GR. Findings from this study provide additional evidence that older youth who age out of or otherwise exit foster care struggle to achieve economic self-sufficiency and also suggest that crossover youth constitute a distinct sub-group of youth exiting foster care who should be targeted for specialized forms of assistance.

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1. Introduction

Roughly 26,000 youth age out of the child welfare system in the United States each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families Bureau, 2012). These youth, who must leave out-of-home placements in the child welfare system upon reaching a certain age, encounter substantial challenges in their transition to adulthood (Barth, 1990; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009; McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1996; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Shook et al., 2013; Stott, 2013). These challenges frequently result in a range of adverse outcomes during young adulthood, including difficulties in achieving economic self-sufficiency (Dworsky, 2005; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Pecora et al., 2006). Studies have consistently shown that former foster youth have higher rates of unemployment and lower income levels than those in the general population (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Courtney et al., 2005, 2007, 2011; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). One recent study suggests that the gap in employment and earnings between former foster youth and their peers persists until at least the age of 30 (Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014). In addition, former foster youth are about two times more likely to report difficulties in paying for rent and utilities than their counterparts in the general population (Courtney et al., 2010). Evidence that older adolescents

leaving foster care face an elevated risk of economic hardship is particularly concerning when viewed in the context of consistent evidence of the association between poverty and a myriad of negative health, behavioral health, criminal justice and other outcomes (Adler & Ostrove, 1999; Hsieh & Pugh, 1993; Lynch, Kaplan, & Shema, 1997).

Receipt of public assistance is one important indicator of the extent to which youth who have aged out of foster care experience economic difficulties during young adulthood. In particular, public assistance receipt can be understood as a proxy for poverty. This is both because public assistance programs are generally means tested and thus require recipients to be below the poverty threshold, and because programs that provide cash assistance rarely provide sufficient income to lift recipients above the poverty line (Finch & Schott, 2013; Schott & Cho, 2011). However, most research on public assistance use among youth aging out of foster care relies largely on descriptive measures (e.g. rates of TANF or food stamp receipt) or comparisons of these rates with youth in the general population (Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005, 2007, 2010; Pecora et al., 2006). Indeed, only two studies to date (Dworsky, 2005; Needell, Cuccaro-Alamin, Brookhart, Jackman, & Shlonsky, 2002) have examined factors associated with public assistance receipt among youth aging out of the foster care system, and these studies are limited in key respects.

Thus, the present study seeks to build on existing research by examining public assistance receipt among a cohort of older youth who exited an out-of-home child welfare placement in Los Angeles (LA) County. We track this cohort prospectively following their discharge from care in order to examine the extent and timing of their utilization of two types of public assistance: California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) and General Relief (GR). The former is California's version of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program and the latter is LA County's general

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assistance program for indigent adults. We also assess the relationship between demographic characteristics and factors related to a youth's experiences in juvenile systems of care, including whether youth have a history of involvement in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, and their receipt of assistance from these two programs.

2. Literature review

It is well-documented that older adolescents leaving foster care encounter obstacles in becoming economically self-sufficient and may come to rely on public assistance. A number of studies provide descriptive information about the rates of public assistance receipt among former foster youth.

An early study (Festinger, 1983) found that, among young adults who exited foster care between the ages of 18–21, 21% had received public assistance within four years of leaving care. Later studies provide additional information about rates of public assistance use among former foster youth. Specifically, findings from a study by Cook (1994) indicate that 30% of youth who left foster care at age 16 or older reported that they were receiving public assistance when they were interviewed between 2.5 and 4 years later when respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24. In a separate study of youth who left foster care at age 17 or 18 in Wisconsin during the mid-1990s, 32% had received some type of public assistance within 18 months of exiting care (Courtney et al., 2001). Similarly, Brandford and English (2004) report that, among youth who were emancipated from foster care in Washington State at age 18, one-third were receiving some type of public assistance at the time of an interview that was conducted between 6 and 12 months following emancipation. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study finds that 50% of a group of foster care alumni between the ages of 18 and 33 had received cash public assistance at some point after their 18th birthday (Pecora et al., 2006). Finally, an evaluation of Los Angeles County's Life Skills Training Program, of particular relevance for the present study given its setting, tracked youth who were in foster care at age 17 and found that, when interviewed two years later, roughly 21% of youth reported receiving some type of public assistance in the 12 months prior to the interview (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2008).

Differences in the types of public assistance examined and duration of study follow-up periods make direct comparisons across the above-described studies difficult. Nonetheless, they offer consistent evidence that receipt of some type of public assistance is a fairly common experience among former foster youth. Additionally, other research shows that former foster youth have rates of public assistance receipt during young adulthood that are higher than their counterparts in the general population (Courtney et al., 2010), highlighting the gap in the economic outcomes between former foster youth and their peers.

Importantly, prior studies have shown that rates of public assistance receipt among youth aging out of foster care vary depending on the type of public assistance under consideration. For example, the results of the study by Brandford and English (2004) indicate that food stamps were the most commonly accessed form of public assistance among former foster youth with 26% of youth receiving this benefit, followed by Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (10%), TANF (9%), and public housing (2%); other studies, including the evaluation of Los Angeles County's Life Skills Training Program, report similar variation in rates of receipt across different types of public assistance (Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney et al., 2005; Needell et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2008; Williams, Pope, Sirles, & Lally, 2005). These differential rates of receipt may be due to a number of factors, including differences in the type of need and in eligibility criteria across different public assistance programs and jurisdictions. Regardless of its cause, evidence that the uptake of public assistance varies by program type underscores the importance of making distinctions between assistance type when examining public assistance receipt and related factors among youth exiting foster care.

The above-noted descriptive findings provide an important foundation for understanding the extent to which former foster youth make use of public assistance and how this compares to their peers in the general population. However, there has been little research on factors that predict the use of public assistance among youth aging out of foster care. Despite valuable insights that might be gained from such research, only two studies to date (Dworsky, 2005; Needell et al., 2002) have examined factors associated with the receipt of public assistance among former foster youth. Dworsky (2005), used administrative data to identify predictors of TANF and food stamp receipt among youth discharged from foster care at ages 16 and above in Wisconsin. In that study, female gender was a strong and consistent positive predictor of receipt of both types of assistance. The strong influence of gender on public assistance receipt is not surprising given that TANF eligibility is generally restricted to families with dependent children, who are overwhelmingly female-headed, and because guidelines for food stamp receipt are stricter for adults who do not have a disability or dependent children. Dworsky also reports that race/ethnicity, and factors related to youths' experience in the foster care system, including reason for entry into care, placement type, discharge outcome, total number of months in care, and age at discharge, were significantly associated with use of TANF and food stamps.

Needell et al. (2002) also used administrative data to examine factors associated with the use of TANF and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) among youth who were emancipated from foster care in California. Risk factors for receipt of each type of public assistance were examined separately for males and females, although a similar pattern of findings was observed for both genders. Among males, age at entry into care, race/ethnicity, placement type at time of discharge from care, and receipt of mental health services while in care were all associated with receipt of either or both TANF and SSI. Among females, race/ethnicity, age at entry into care, the total number of placement locations, placement type at time of discharge, and reason for removal were all significantly associated with the receipt of either TANF or SSI.

These studies are important, but have key limitations. First, with respect to the present study, one shortcoming of the two existing studies is that neither looks specifically at whether youth who were involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system were at an increased risk of public assistance receipt. While Dworsky's study includes youth who entered the foster care system due to issues with delinquency, it does not specifically identify youth who had a history of both delinquency and maltreatment. This is notable as the substantial body of research establishing a link between child maltreatment and delinquency (Goodkind, Shook, Kim, Pohl, & Herring, 2012; Ireland, Smith, & Thornberry, 2002; Ryan, 2006; Ryan & Testa, 2005), suggests that a significant number of children involved in the child welfare system are exposed to the risk of "crossing over" to the juvenile justice system, or vice-versa (Herz et al., 2012). These youth, often referred to as "crossover youth" (Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010), are increasingly being recognized as a group that may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing poor outcomes during adulthood (Herz et al., 2012). Indeed, evidence suggests that crossover youth come from families of origin with particularly complex needs (Halemba et al., 2004), have high rates of behavioral health disorders and experience poor educational outcomes (Herz & Ryan, 2008). In addition, divisions between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems mean that the unique needs of crossover youth may go unmet by either system (Altschuler, Strangler, Berkeley, & Burton, 2009; Herz et al., 2010). All of these factors may hinder the ability of crossover youth to attain economic self-sufficiency during adulthood and may lead to elevated rates of public assistance receipt in this population.

As an additional limitation of these two studies, neither includes general assistance (GA), among their measures of public assistance receipt. Instead, they focus on TANF, food stamps and SSI, depending on the study. This is an important gap because GA programs generally

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