



CHAPIN HALL
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AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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Opening Statement

Today I share with you the findings of a study being conducted by Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago and the state public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin that follows young people as they “age out” of the foster care system. Our study involves three interviews with young people. We interviewed 732 youth in 2002 and 2003 who were 17 or 18 years old and still under the jurisdiction of the child welfare agency and followed up in 2004 with 603 (or 82 percent) of these young people when they were on average about 19 and one-half years old. The information I present today comes from these interviews. Reports from a third wave of interviews conducted last year when the respondents were 21 will be available later this summer.

Our study informs child welfare policy in at least three ways. First, it provides the only comprehensive view of how foster youth are faring in the transition to adulthood since the Foster Care Independence Act became law. Second, it provides a natural experiment regarding the effects of allowing youth to remain in foster care past age 18. Illinois allows youth to remain in care through their 21st birthday, whereas Iowa and Wisconsin generally discharge youth around their 18th birthday and almost never later than their 19th birthday. Third, our interviews include questions used in nationally representative studies, allowing us to compare experiences of foster youth to those of other young people. I will focus on four study findings that I believe help inform policy and practice.

First, although some of the young people are faring reasonably well, more of them are having significant difficulties during the transition to adulthood. Few of them are obtaining the education necessary to succeed in today’s economy. More than one-third had neither a high school diploma nor a general equivalency degree compared to one-tenth of 19-year-olds nationally. Perhaps most troubling, whereas about 57 percent of 19-year-olds nationally are enrolled in a two- or four-year college, this was true for less than one-quarter of the current and

former foster youth in our study. Only about two-fifths of our study participants were employed at age 19, compared to nearly three-fifths of their peers; over three-quarters of those who had worked in the past year had earned less than \$5,000. Foster youth in transition were twice as likely as other 19-year-olds to report not having enough money to pay their rent or mortgage (12 percent) or to be unable to pay a utility bill (12 percent) and 1.5 times more likely to report having their phone service disconnected (21 percent). Fourteen percent of those discharged from care reported having been homeless at least once since leaving care. Compared to other 19-year-olds, foster youth in transition were more likely to report that health conditions limited their daily functioning, and reported more emergency room visits and hospitalizations. About one-third of our study participants suffered from mental health problems we assessed, including post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and depression. Nearly half of the young women in our study had been pregnant by age 19, twice as many as their peers. About one-quarter of the young people reported having children. While both males and females were more than twice as likely as other 19-year-olds to report having a child, they were less likely to report being married or cohabiting. Many of the young people in our study had experienced trouble with the law; 30 percent of the males and 11 percent of the females reported being incarcerated at least once between our first and follow-up interviews. They were more likely than other 19-year-olds to report engaging in criminal behavior and being victims of crime.

A second major study finding is that receipt of independent living services during the transition to adulthood is arguably spotty at best. We asked the young people questions about the services they received between our first and second wave of interviews in six domains: education, vocational training and employment, budgeting and financial management, health education, housing, and services to promote youth development. The only domain in which at least half of the young adults reported receiving at least one service was educational support.

Third, we found that a majority of young people would remain in care past age 18 if given the opportunity and that doing so appears to convey significant benefits. Among study youth in Illinois, the vast majority remained in care past their 19th birthday and over half remained past their 20th birthday. About half of the young people remaining in care lived in traditional family foster care, kinship care, or group care, but about half moved on to various forms of supervised independent living. Remaining in care past 18 was associated with increased receipt of independent living services, better access to health and mental health care, a doubled likelihood of being in school and tripled likelihood of being in college, and a one-quarter reduction in the risk of pregnancy between ages 17-18 and 19. It was also associated with a decreased risk of some forms of criminal justice system involvement.

Fourth, our study provides evidence of the need for practitioners and policymakers to focus more on the family relations of foster youth, given the importance of these relationships to foster youth in transition to adulthood. Over one-third of our study participants lived with a relative at the time of their follow-up interview and the vast majority of all the young people reported feeling very close to one or more members of their family of origin.

I look forward to answering your questions and discussing the policy implications of our study's findings.