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Youth with Foster Care Histories: Emancipation and Well-Being

Foster care is a complex set of institutional and social systems involving parents and their children, child welfare agencies and staff, host households and adoptive families, school systems, employers, and many informal networks of mentorship and kinfolk. While the health and well-being of children, youth, and families is often at the heart of this work, many systemic challenges exist that may prevent individuals from accessing services and networks of policy and action ostensibly designed to help.

In this issue of *Focus On Poverty*, we peer through the lens of foster care to highlight work on race and well-being outcomes, post-secondary education, and extended benefits for young adults moving out of the foster care system. While these are just a few of many important topics related to foster care, we hope the insights contained within inspire conversation as well as action.

We start with an overview from researchers Reeve Kennedy, Marina Potter, and Sarah Font addressing the intersection of racial disparities, well-being outcomes, and youth experiences in foster care. The authors describe how outcomes related to education, employment, housing, and mental health correspond with demographic factors such as age, race and ethnicity, and geographic location to provide a more nuanced understanding of these important relationships.

Next, Nathanael Okpych and Mark Courtney review barriers to completing a college degree for young adults with foster care histories seeking post-secondary education. Their longitudinal approach evaluates students with foster care histories attending 2- and 4-year colleges and compares outcomes with low-income first-generation college students over a 10-year period. Results suggest that financial assistance, balancing school with employment needs, and the challenges of parenting as a student all have significant effects on those young people. On-campus assistance programs, when they exist, can also be very helpful for these students.

Thom Reilly and David Schlinkert also take a longitudinal approach. They assess outcomes for emerging adults with foster care histories who are offered extended eligibility for assistance programs, expanding access from 18 to 21 years of age. The authors assess 20 years of extended eligibility for young adults in Clark County, Nevada. Keys to enhancing positive outcomes include direct financial assistance, health care coverage, and access to case management and support services.

Included within this issue of *Focus On Poverty* are a Research to Watch item and the Classroom Supplement. Researcher Sarah Font is following a cohort of over 75,000 Wisconsin high school students and tracking differences between those in contact with the Child Protective Services (CPS) system and peers who are low-income but not otherwise involved with CPS. Identifying and addressing barriers to educational attainment remains an important focus for youth who face economic insecurity as well as those moving through the foster care system. The Classroom Supplement offers potential discussion questions as well as a list of IRP and other resources related to foster care and child welfare.

Thank you for reading *Focus on Poverty*. Please send any questions or comments to IRP Communications Director Judith Siers-Poisson at sierspoisson@wisc.edu. A note to educators: If you use *Focus On Poverty* in the classroom, we would especially love to hear from you!

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Foster Care Well-Being Outcomes by Race and Ethnicity

Reeve S. Kennedy, Marina H. Potter, and Sarah A. Font

TAKEAWAYS

Youth with foster care experience may have more in common with each other across racial lines, compared to the general population, given the typically shared experiences of socioeconomic and other disadvantages among youth placed into foster care.

Black youth with experience in foster care have 20% lower odds of achieving similar employment or substantial earnings, compared to White foster care youth.

Hispanic youth with foster care histories have 10% lower odds of achieving stable housing compared to non-Hispanic foster care youth.

Black and Indigenous youth remain historically over-represented in the foster care population.

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Foster care is an extreme intervention in the life of a family. While sometimes necessary for the safety and protection of children, research on the long-term effects of foster care show mixed results.[1] Heterogeneous outcomes related to time spent in foster care—positive, negative, or null—can be difficult to predict and are not mutually exclusive. Children with foster care histories can have positive, negative, or neutral experiences within and across out-of-home care contexts. By taking a "bird's eye" view of foster care-related research through a meta-analytic approach, researchers, advocates, and policymakers can gain a better sense of how research results may vary. Patterns of variation can depend on which outcomes are measured and which research methodologies are used, the geographic location and age of the child when entering and exiting foster care, and other important factors.[2] Disparities in foster care experiences and outcomes across racialized groups in the United States—for Black and Indigenous children in particular—have resulted in a push for more, and better, research on these topics.[3]

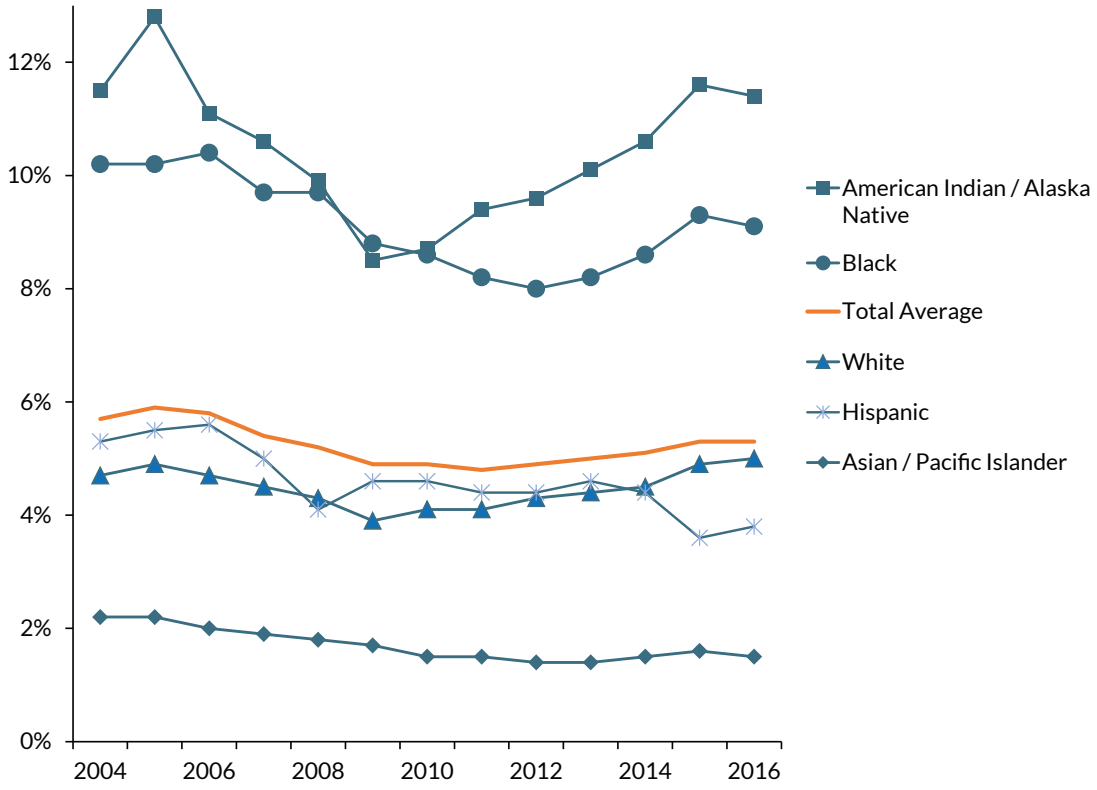
As with other majority Anglo countries, Black and Indigenous children in the United States experience foster care placement at higher rates than their White counterparts (see Figure 1).[4] When removed from a family home, however, children of color are less likely than White youth to be placed in a living context aligned with the racial, ethnic, or cultural traditions of their family of origin; in the absence of proactive socialization, identity and self-esteem may suffer.[5] Despite broad differences by race among populations of children and adolescents experiencing foster care, scant research explores differences in health and well-being outcomes.

Foster care is an extreme intervention in the life of a family. While sometimes necessary for the safety and protection of children, research on the long-term effects of foster care is mixed results.

Study Parameters

We used a meta-analytic framework to synthesize and analyze research focused on well-being outcomes by race and ethnicity among individuals currently or formerly placed in out-of-home care. This population of young people, which we refer to as foster care-impacted persons (FCIPs), is inclusive of individuals with experience in non-relative family foster care, kinship care, group homes, and residential facilities. We reviewed studies based on populations located in the United States, written in English, and published between January 2000 and June 2021 as a peer-reviewed journal article or doctoral dissertation. In order to

Figure 1. Percent Chance of Ever Being Placed in Foster Care by Age 18, by Race/Ethnicity and Year



Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Data, United States, 2004–2016.

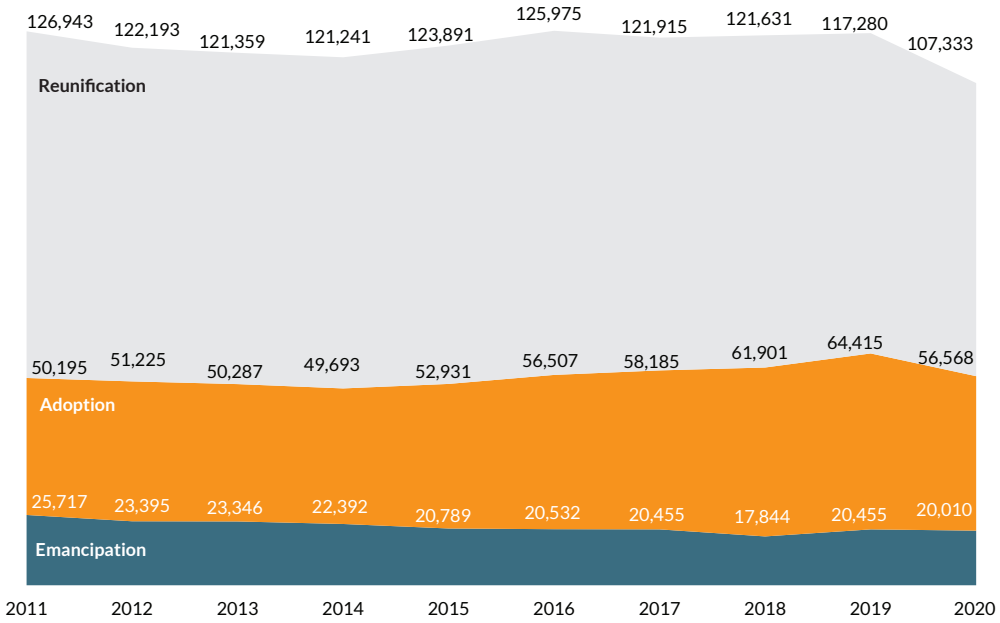
assess aspects of racial disparities in various outcomes, these collected works needed to include data reported separately (i.e., disaggregated) on two or more racialized or ethnic populations. Our goal was to assess "typical" foster care scenario outcomes, rather than specialized care scenarios. As such, studies were excluded if they centered exclusively on intervention programs or treatment-based foster care, juvenile justice programs, care for individuals with developmental disabilities, psychiatric care, or homeless populations.

Research Findings and Limitations

Positive effects commonly measured in the studies we assessed include topics such as educational achievement, employment, and earnings whereas negative effects include homelessness, risky or externalizing behaviors, mental health concerns, and justice system involvement. Our analysis uncovers substantial limitations in the academic research to thoroughly assess racial disparities in foster care outcomes. Before offering a few findings of interest, we foreground some of these limitations.

First, the number of studies centered on experiences of individuals emancipated from, or "aging out" of, foster care is misaligned with the relatively small proportion of children and youth (about 10%) who actually age out (see Figure 2).[6] Important work (i.e., the Midwest Study) led to a large and sustained interest in topics and pathways to well-being for youth aging out of the system. Yet this body of work provides limited insight—or data—on children and youth who experience more probable outcomes such as reunifying with

Figure 2. Number of Children Exiting Foster Care by Reason, in the United States (+ Washington, DC and Puerto Rico), 2011–2020



Source: Kids Count Data Center, 2022, Children exiting foster care by reason in the United States. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

biological parents or other kin, being adopted, or establishing legal guardianship relations.[7] Studies evaluating post-discharge racial disparities are rarer still.

Second, due to uneven geographic distributions of racialized and ethnic groups within the United States, certain characteristics related to system involvement are very influential on well-being outcomes during and after foster care; these include location, timing of entry and exit, and familial contexts. Child welfare services are typically county based and, as such, the experiences of youth in the foster care system will vary depending on location and at what age they may come into contact with the system. Despite these important factors, many studies in our analysis did not report pertinent variables such as age at entry, placement stability, placement type, or length of time spent in care. Future research will benefit from closer attention to these details as well as the magnitude and direction of racial disparities in well-being during and after care.

Third, few studies report outcomes for Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander persons with foster care histories despite Indigenous children and youth being subject to distinctly higher rates of foster care entry.[8] Likewise, policies and practices under the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978) may result in different types and durations of foster care experiences for Native children and youth, thus influencing different well-being outcomes.

Several findings of interest emerged from this analysis. Importantly, we found no significant differences among outcomes by race for justice system involvement, high-risk behaviors, or educational attainment, suggesting that possible effects of foster care on these outcomes are similar across racial groups.

Black former foster youth, however, were less likely to achieve full- or part-time employment and financial stability relative to White and non-Black youth with foster care histories. This gap may be a function of systemic employment discrimination as it largely

mirrors observed racial disparities in the general population. Hispanic former foster youth, in contrast, had lower rates of homelessness relative to other groups. While more research is needed, we suspect such results reflect a concentration of experiences including foster care involvement, justice system interaction, and homelessness, which are faced primarily by populations also experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. Put another way, the shared social contexts of Black, White, and Hispanic persons with foster care experience appear more alike than otherwise-similar persons in the general population.

Among the studies examined in this meta-analysis, those collecting baseline data after 2002 reported lower odds of mental health concerns for Black former foster care youth relative to other groups. This suggestion of potential racial differences in manifestations of psychological distress needs further research and could imply the under-detection and therefore under-treatment of mental health concerns for Black persons with foster care histories.

Disparities in foster care experiences and outcomes across racialized groups in the United States have resulted in a push for more, and better, research on these topics.

Summary

While foster care affects only a small percentage of persons involved with child welfare systems, it is among the most intensive and controversial types of family interventions.[9] Characterizing the nature and extent of racial and ethnic disparities across well-being domains for youth with foster care histories is important, especially considering concerns about persistent overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous youth in the U.S. American foster care system.[10] While heterogeneity in outcomes is expected, more research on emergent patterns across and between racialized groups can help create more efficient, equitable, and effective systems for the provision of foster care in its various forms.■

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Sarah A. Font is Associate Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at Penn State University and is an IRP Affiliate.

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Sources & Methods

Type of analysis: Quantitative meta-analysis.

Data Source: Peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and reports (N = 70, with 39 unique datasets).

Type of data: Studies reporting well-being outcomes by race and ethnicity.

Sample definition: Studies focused on individuals currently or previously residing in foster care, including non-relative family foster care, kinship care, group homes, and residential facilities.

Time frame: Studies published between January 2000 and July 2021.

Limitations: Many studies did not report important aspects of the foster care experience such as: age at entry, placement stability, type of placement, or length of time spent in foster care. Research on well-being outcomes following reunification, adoption, and guardianship is quite small compared to the disproportionately larger body of work focused on youth "aging out" of foster care. Despite having the highest rates of foster care placement of any racialized group, American Indian / Alaska Native former foster youth were largely under-represented in cumulative results and largely excluded from this analysis.

Research to Watch

Sarah A. Font

Left Behind? Educational Disadvantage, Child Protection, and Foster Care

Current educational policies for children involved with Child Protective Services (CPS) focus largely on the minority of children currently in or aging out of foster care, and target school stability and college access. This ongoing work investigates the nature of high school education performance and attainment, and post-secondary (college) enrollment among youth with prior or current CPS contact and their low-income, but not CPS-contacted, peers. Following a cohort of over 75,000 high school students in Wisconsin, we find that CPS-contacted youth have lower educational performance and greater educational barriers than their low-income peers.

Youth aging out of care face unique disadvantages regarding on-time high school completion but, conditional on high school performance and completion, enroll in college at similar or higher rates. Youth adopted from foster care appear to attain higher levels of education than other youth with foster care histories, despite similar test scores and high rates of special education placement. Overall, we find little evidence of under-enrollment in college. Across all groups, over 60% of those who graduate on time with "basic" proficiency or above in English and math go on to enroll in college. Although under-prepared youth involved with CPS are less likely to enroll in college, it is not evident that this is disadvantageous, given poor post-secondary outcomes for youth requiring remedial education.

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When Foster Youth Go to College: Assessing Barriers and Supports to Degree Completion for College Students with Foster Care Histories

Nathanael J. Okpych and
Mark E. Courtney

TAKEAWAYS

Understanding barriers to success can help college campuses address persistent obstacles that thwart degree completion.

Students with foster care backgrounds were less likely than low-income, first-generation students to persist through their first year and complete a degree in six years.

Three significant barriers to degree completion were identified: economic hardship, needing to work a lot of hours while taking courses, and being a parent.

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Young people with foster care histories are a small but important subpopulation of college students. Unlike most college students, those with foster care histories often navigate the transition to adult independence and financial self-sufficiency with minimal support from kin. Attaining a college degree, however, can be a powerful determinant for their health and well-being later in life. To support students with foster care backgrounds into and through higher education, we need to identify potential barriers so they can be addressed and identify potential promoters so they can be bolstered.

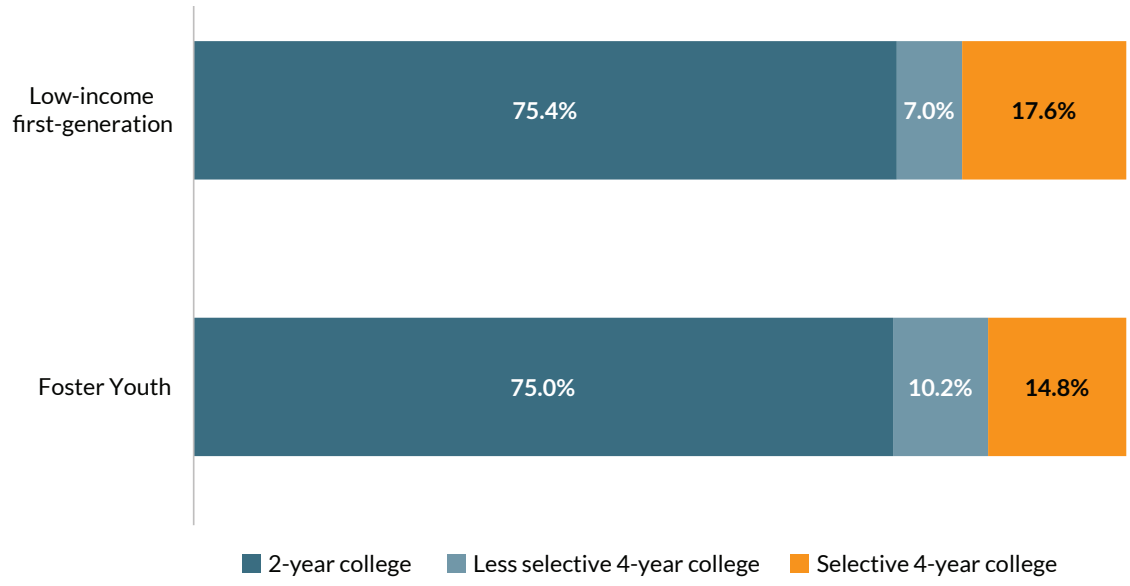
In this study, we compare degree-completion outcomes of college students with foster care histories in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin to a meaningful comparison group: low-income, first-generation college students.[1] We then investigate factors that promote and hinder the chances of graduating from college among students with foster care backgrounds. Insights generated by this work can help child welfare departments and college recruitment and retention offices to properly identify students who may benefit from strategic engagement, supplemental mentorship, and informational support.

> Characteristics of a college and its student body can play important roles in student performance, independent of student characteristics.

Educational Preparation and Success

Philanthropic organizations, federal and state legislators, and nonprofit organizations have increasingly focused on foster youth as an important subgroup of adolescents and emerging adults.[2] However, prior research on the subpopulation of college students with foster care experience is scant relative to the extensive scholarship on the general population of college students. Most of what we know comes from qualitative studies that interviewed a small number of students with care experience, but these studies are not intended to produce generalizable findings. A couple of quantitative studies identified several factors detrimental to educational success for former foster youth, which include: early parenthood, substance use problems, physical or learning disabilities, a history of repeating grades, and placement in a congregate care setting (vs. foster care home).[3] Conversely, factors found to increase the odds of educational success for foster youth include students' own educational aspirations, higher reading proficiency, early work experience, and receipt of significant preparation while still in foster care. Social engagement (e.g., frequent attendance at college social events) has also been positively associated with degree completion.[4] These existing studies suffer from one or more limitations, such as not having a clear and representative sample, poor response rate, and not focusing exclusively on college degree completion.

Figure 1. Comparison of First College Attended, by Type, for Low-Income, First-Generation Students and Foster Youth. Differences between the Two Groups Are Not Statistically Significant.



Sources: Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 23*(1), 28-54.

Our study addresses these issues by analyzing data from a longitudinal study (i.e., the Midwest Study) of youth in three Midwestern states and linking it to college records from the National Student Clearinghouse when study participants were about 29 years old. As a first step, we compare college persistence rates and degree completion rates of Midwest Study participants to those of a nationally representative sample of first-generation, low-income students. We then evaluate a wide range of pre-entry factors (i.e., student background prior to college entry) and post-entry factors (i.e., participant characteristics after college entry) to identify factors that increase and decrease the likelihood of Midwest Study college students completing a 2-year or 4-year degree. We also investigate institutional factors as predictors of degree completion, a focal area missing from other research on this subpopulation. Characteristics of a college and its student body can play important roles in student performance, independent of student characteristics.

Sustained and consistent social support—or relational permanency—can be very influential.

Findings

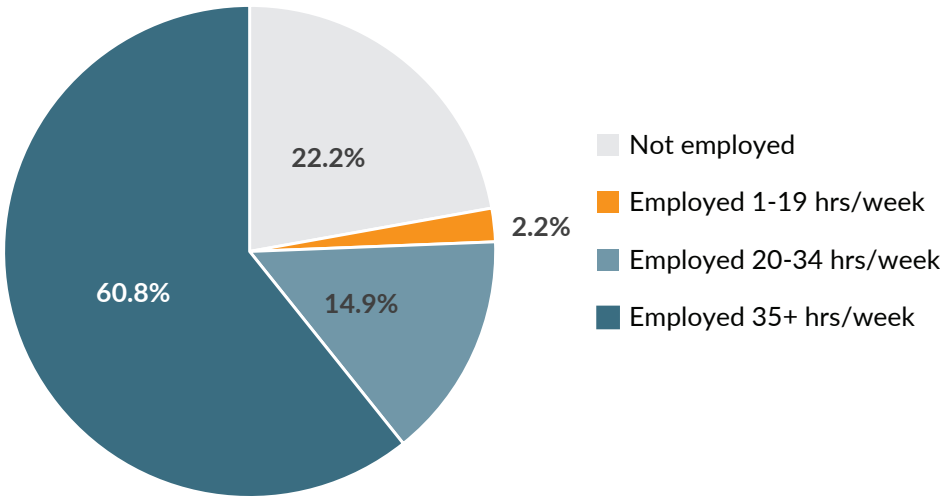
As seen in Figure 1, most students with foster care histories in our sample attended a 2-year college, while far fewer attended either a very-selective or less-selective 4-year college. Although the types of college that Midwest Study participants attended are similar to those attended by low-income, first-generation students, there are stark differences in persistence and degree completion rates. Nearly three-quarters of low-income, first-generation college students persisted through their first year of college compared to less than half of foster youth. In terms of degree completion, low-income, first-

generation students were more than twice as likely as foster youth to have completed a 2- or 4-year degree program within 6 years of initial enrollment.

Our regression analyses point to several factors influencing the expected odds of students with foster care experience completing a college degree. We find that three post-enrollment factors play a particularly large role as barriers to degree completion: needing to work full time, being a parent, and facing economic hardships. Each of these factors independently decreased the expected likelihood that students earned a college degree. Figures 2, 3, and 4 display the rates at which Midwest Study participants encountered each of these factors.

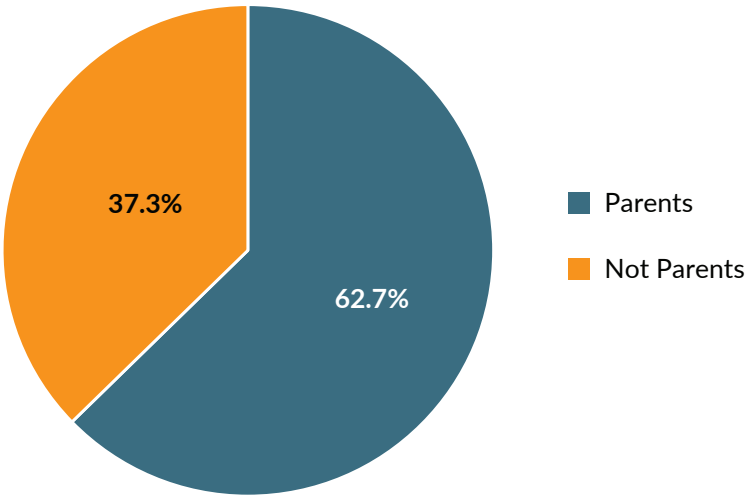
Institutional factors also played a roll in the likelihood of degree attainment among Midwest Study participants. Increased institutional expenditures on academic support, student services, and instruction each increased the odds of degree completion. A higher rate of Pell Grant recipients at an institution was associated with increased likelihood of degree completion while, conversely, institutions with higher rates of part-time students predicted lower odds of degree attainment.

Figure 2. Post-Enrollment Employment (N = 329).



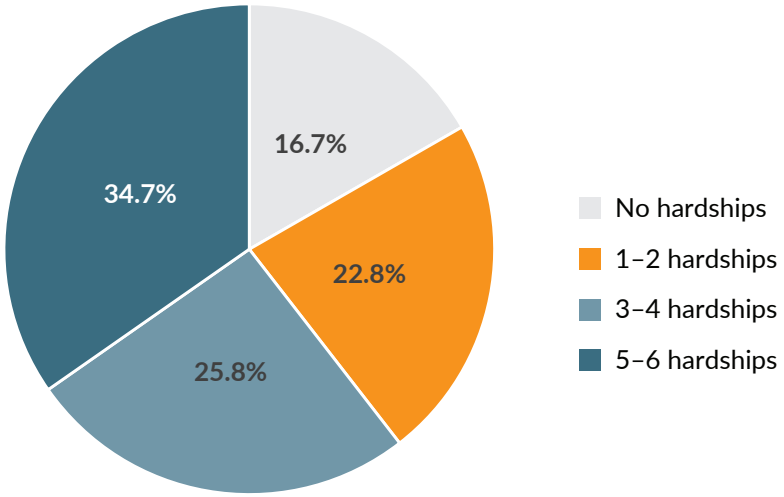
Source: Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *23*(1), 28-54.

Figure 3. Post-Enrollment Parental Status (N=329).



Source: Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *23*(1), 28-54.

Figure 4. Economic Hardships Faced by Students, Post-Enrollment (N = 329).



Source: Okpych, N. J. & Courtney, M. E. (2021). Barriers to degree completion for college students with foster care histories: Results from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *23*(1), 28-54.

Gender, age, and social support were also significant predictors of degree completion. Women were more likely to earn a degree than men, and youth who enrolled in college prior to age 19 were more likely to earn a degree than older enrollees. Social support was one of the few pre-entry factors positively associated with degree completion. As researchers Sarah Font and Angelique Day both noted in a recent IRP webinar on the topic of supporting youth exiting foster care, sustained and consistent social support—or relational permanency during and after exit—can be very influential.[5]

Young adults with foster care histories face a unique set of challenges above and beyond those of other groups that universities and colleges often identify as "at risk" of dropping out.

Practice and Policy Implications

How can child welfare departments and colleges best support former foster youth? First, adequate information and guidance for adolescents still in foster care is critical in helping choose a college that is a good fit. Many factors shape a student's college choice (e.g., academic performance, location, reputation, affordability), but the findings from this study suggest that students were more likely to graduate from schools with higher investments in support services. While we have found post-enrollment factors as particularly important, high-quality guidance in the high school years aimed at identifying good-fit institutions also sets the stage for later success.[6]

Next, schools must know which students fit the criteria for enhanced support. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which colleges encourage all incoming students to fill out regardless of financial need, is the portal through which students can apply for federal student aid, including grants, work-study funds, and loans. But not all youth with care experience complete the FAFSA, taking them out of the running for potential need-based funding (e.g., Pell Grants) and making it hard for colleges to identify these students. Colleges should add two supplemental questions to the college application packet to help identify students with foster care experience. One would ask about an applicant's history of foster care involvement and a second would identify the age at which the applicant was last in foster care. This will ensure these students receive financial assistance such as Pell Grants, $5,000 per year Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs), and college tuition and fee waivers (in states that have them) that can reduce financial strain from economic hardships, needing to work full time, and costs associated with being a parent.

Finally, campus-based support programs—for example, the Seita Scholars program at Western Michigan University—can also help students overcome post-enrollment challenges.[7] More than 30 states have at least one 4-year college offering programs for foster youth; the Guardian Scholars program at University of California system schools is one example. California, along with Michigan and Washington, have implemented statewide programs with a range of academic, financial, social, and logistical supports.[8] Such programs are designed to serve young people with histories of trauma and are often available to young adults even after aging out of foster care services.[9]

Summary

Our study found foster youth much less likely to complete a degree program than low-income, first-generation students, a student subgroup that has been identified in higher

education as being at greater risk of dropout. Such results reinforce the premise that young adults with foster care histories face a unique set of challenges above and beyond those of other groups that universities and colleges often identify as "at risk" of dropping out.

Future research needs to investigate disparate pathways students with foster care experience take through college. Financial supports and on-campus support programs for foster youth offer promising avenues to success in the face of persistent challenges, but more research is needed to identify the kinds and levels of support that are most effective. College administrators, lawmakers, and foster care advocates can and should implement policies and practices to reduce barriers that aim to promote long-term success for students with care histories. This is especially the case at 2-year institutions, where youth with care histories most commonly enroll.■

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Sources & Methods

Type of analysis: Quantitative secondary analysis

Data Source: Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (i.e., Midwest Study, PI: Mark Courtney) and the Beginning Postsecondary Survey Longitudinal Study. College records for degree completion (i.e., outcome) measure obtained from National Student Clearinghouse.

Type of data: Longitudinal surveys

Sample definition: Youth eligible if 17 years old in 2002, lived in one of the three designated Midwestern states (i.e., Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin), and had been in foster care for at least one year prior to 17th birthday.

Time frame: Baseline interviews conducted in 2002–2003 with follow-up every two years until 2011 (when population was 25–26 years old).

Limitations: Generalizability to foster youth in other geographic locations is uncertain. Information on specific courses in which students were enrolled (and thus which may influence progress toward completion), was unavailable. Low number of participants limited statistical power. Students' academic histories were not available but may have provided more nuanced understanding of otherwise self-reported data.

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Comparing Outcomes 20 Years Apart: Transitioning Out of Foster Care for Emerging Adults

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TAKEAWAYS

Comparing two cohorts of youth transitioning from foster care, 20 years apart, offers opportunities to assess changes and challenges for extended foster care programs.

One of the most beneficial policy changes in recent decades has been expanding eligibility for foster care youth services from 18 to 21 years of age.

Programs providing direct financial assistance, health care coverage, access to case management, and support services can be key to minimizing negative outcomes and increasing positive outcomes in foster youths' transition to adulthood.

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Young adults transitioning out of foster care face a well-documented set of challenges. Despite significant federal policies enacted to address these needs, most notable being policies extending benefits beyond one's 18th birthday, challenges remain. Youth transitioning out of foster care into independent living, a process called emancipation, face challenges including maintaining financial stability, health care coverage, and attaining educational goals. Buffers against such challenges include gaining early job experience and maintaining positive social support networks.

A study conducted in 2001 interviewed foster youth living in Clark County, Nevada (in the Las Vegas Valley), who were transitioning out of the child welfare system and into the rigors of independent living.[1] Returning to the same location, we revived the survey to examine how this population of youth compared twenty years later.[2] Between 2001 and 2021, Clark County has developed several important programs to prepare and support former foster care youth in their transition to self-sufficiency. Step-Up is one such program where young adults are afforded continued financial support until age 21 and are eligible for assistance related to housing, transportation, and case management services. Our goal in revisiting this population using the same survey instrument—with minor but important adjustments for gender identity and race/ethnicity—was to generate cross-sectional research regarding former foster youth and assess the effectiveness of programs providing financial, supportive, and case management services.

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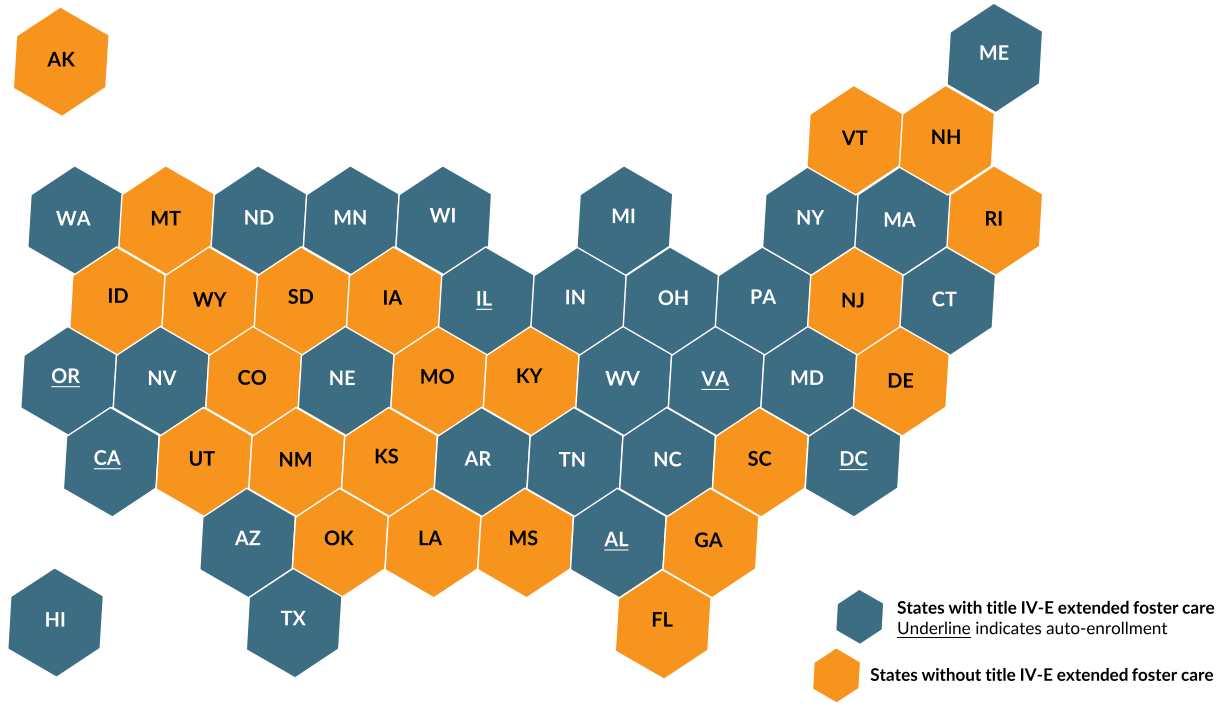
Extended Foster Care Coverage

Twenty-eight states (and Washington DC) have enacted specific legislation for extending foster care benefits from age 18 to age 21, as seen in Figure 1. Under this framework, emancipated youth qualify for Medicaid coverage; job training (i.e., Job Corps); financial aid for post-secondary education; and, for unhoused youth, housing assistance for up to three years.[3] Despite the resources available for extended foster care benefits in over half of states, research on this topic continues to identify persistent challenges for youth aging out of foster care.

Where extended benefits are available, youth fare considerably better in outcomes such as educational attainment, employment, housing stability, less involvement with criminal justice systems,

Figure 1. States Offering Extended Foster Care Coverage for Young Adults, Ages 18 to 21.



Source: Adapted from Government Accountability Office analysis of documentation from Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-411.pdf

and income stability. Even when available, however, a fair portion of youth do not opt for extended benefits, noting frustrations with the child welfare system.[4] Efforts to increase the uptake of extended care benefits requires understanding common barriers and generalized successes in assisting youth with transitions to self-sufficiency beyond their 18th birthday.

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Clark County – Correlations and Comparisons

We approached this work with the aim of comparing the overall profile of youth transitioning from foster care to independent living in 2001 to results collected from a similar group in 2021 (see Table 1). Primary outcome measures included categories of education, legal issues, living arrangements, health care, and employment. Some outcome measures were strongly associated with other measures in both the 2001 and 2021 samples. For example, multiple foster care placements and less formal education correlated with more difficulty in the post-discharge period. Job training, services, positive support networks, and on-the-job experience were all associated with less difficulty after exiting the system.

A key insight from the 2021 data was the importance of tangible services provided for youth prior to leaving foster care. Total services received, even more than educational attainment, was associated with a greater sense of life satisfaction for youth in later life. Total services received was also positively associated with social network size, suggesting that services toward the end of foster care may help build positive social networks as well as support qualities of mental health and self-esteem. Youth who were employed or in school full time were also significantly more likely to note better mental health than those who were unemployed or not in school.

Youth who experienced a higher number of foster care placements tended to also see a smaller social network size and fewer total services received, suggesting that individuals connected with fewer total services may develop less robust social networks. This is important to note as wider social networks are associated with a stronger sense of life satisfaction for former foster youth. Longer lengths of time in foster care are also associated with a higher number of placements, suggesting that moving between placements occurs more often for youth waiting longer for adoption or to age out of the system.

Overall, young adults in the 2021 cohort demonstrated significant improvements compared to their 2001 counterparts. Positive outcomes included being more financially secure, notable declines in involvement with law enforcement, less illegal activity, better educational outcomes, fewer job terminations, and less homelessness. Youth in 2021 were also less likely to be married and had fewer pregnancies and children than youth in the 2001 study.

Table 1. Demographic Factors of Youth in 2001 and 2021 Cohorts

	2001 (n = 100)	2021 (n = 114)
Gender		
Female	55%	50%
Male	45%	44%
Other		6%
Average age		
Respondents	20.2 years	19.4 years
Age at foster care entry	9.3 years	12.1 years
Number of placements		
1–3 families	25%	68%
4 or more families	75%	32%
Race/ethnicity		
White	56%	28%
African American	30%	43%
Latino	10%	30%
Native American	1%	2%
Asian	1%	4%
Other	11%	24%
Marital status		
Never married	79%	99%
Married	13%	1%
Divorced/separated	8%	0%

Source: Reilly, T. & Schlinkert, D. (2022). Transition from foster care: A cross sectional comparison of youth outcomes twenty years apart. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *0*(0).

Trends in the experience of foster care also shifted in the 20-year interim. Compared to youth participating in the 2001 study, youth in the 2021 study saw fewer foster care placements, had more visits with caseworkers in the year prior to exiting care, were generally older when entering out-of-home care, received significantly more services, and had a higher overall satisfaction rating regarding their time in care.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, youth in the 2021 cohort reported receiving far less guidance related to independent living skills. These are important for building self-sufficiency, yet the COVID-19 public health emergency seems to have played a role in reducing training availability in 2020 and 2021.

Educational attainment rates rose slightly for youth in the 2021 cohort though rates have remained quite low overall. Nearly half of emancipated youth left foster care without a high school degree or GED in 2021. Increased educational attainment was positively associated with self-reported life satisfaction and mental health for youth in the 2021 cohort. This demonstrates a clear need for developing closer, positive connections between school systems and child welfare agencies to promote student success.[5]

Extended benefit programs offer both pragmatic and innovative models for supporting foster youth in the critical period of emerging adulthood.

Implications

Programs such as Step-Up in Clark County, Nevada can offer productive alternatives to youth navigating the transition out of foster care. Direct financial assistance, health care coverage, and access to support services and case management can help stabilize this transition for young adults ages 18 to 21. Access to these vital services may increase the allure of programs such as Step-Up, potentially reaching a larger number of those foster care youth verging on adulthood.[6]

Because the federal government does not reimburse or provide matching financial assistance to state and local child welfare agencies for youth not under the jurisdiction or care of a state or local agency, there are few programs such as Step-Up nationwide. We suggest the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services review models where, for instance, youth remain under the jurisdiction of a court (rather than a child welfare agency) to consider funding such programs through matching-fund arrangements similar to the standard practices of federal support for state and local child welfare agencies. Programs such as Step-Up offer both pragmatic and innovative models for supporting foster youth in the critical transition period of emerging adulthood.■

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Sources & Methods

Type of analysis: Quantitative comparative analysis; case study (Clark County, Nevada).

Data Source: Survey responses and interviews, comparing 2001 results to those collected in 2021.

Type of data: Surveys and interviews. Interviews in 2021 conducted over Zoom or telephone.

Sample definition: Youth emancipated from foster care for at least 6 months and part of the Clark County (Nevada) Voluntary Jurisdiction / Step-Up program.

Time frame: 2001 survey instrument redeployed in 2021. Comparison interviews conducted between June and November 2021.

Limitations: Data collection in both 2001 and 2021 relied on self-reports of behavior, which can be biased. This case study, based in one Nevada county, has limited generalizability to youth in other counties, nonrespondents in Clark County, and those in other states. Data do not account for the duration or severity of unmet needs.

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