

THE JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

MEDIA COVERAGE – April 2010

Compiled by The Hatcher Group

Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition:



The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Helping youth leaving foster care make successful transitions to adulthood.

Center
for the
Study
of
Social
Policy

A Vision for the Next Decade

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The Christian Science Monitor, pg. 36

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BLOGS AND TWITTER

Hundreds of organizations and individuals commented on the study on Twitter.com. Here are a few of the more prominent tweets:

<http://twitter.com/cspanwj/statuses/11880256724> (C-Span, 6K followers)

- Gary Stangler, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, will discuss foster care & the transition process. Call, email or tweet your ?s

<http://twitter.com/katiecouric/status/11852984990> (Katie Couric, 69K followers)

- Katie Couric's Notebook: After Foster Care <http://bit.ly/bGWiDI>

Others notable people/organizations that tweeted about the study include: [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), [Youth Transition Funders Group](#), [Bruce Lesley of First Focus](#), [Safe Place](#), [Youth Worker Journal](#), [Providers' Council](#), [CBS Evening News](#) and [Spotlight on Poverty](#).

Numerous blogs also picked up news about the study. They include:

IPR Poverty Dispatch

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/dispatch/2010/04/07/aging-out-of-foster-care/>

Foster Care and Poverty

[WNYPedia.net](http://wnymedia.net) - <http://wnymedia.net/>

National Campaign to Prevent Pregnancy

http://blog.thenationalcampaign.org/pregnant_pause/2010/04/early-pregnancy-and-foster-car.php

Fixing Foster Care

[INVISIBLE CHILDREN](http://www.invisiblechildren.org/) - <http://www.invisiblechildren.org/>

Tough Road for Youth Aging Out

[Reflections of a Foster Youth](http://prairieguy.wordpress.com/) - <http://prairieguy.wordpress.com/>

Grandparents' blog:

[Grandparents blog](http://unhappygrammy-grandparentsblog.blogspot.com/) - <http://unhappygrammy-grandparentsblog.blogspot.com/>

Legally Kidnapped

<http://legallykidnapped.blogspot.com/>

Breaking Fast on the Beach

<http://padrewarren.net/2010/04/07/aging-out-of-foster-care-and-the-church/>

PRINT

The New York Times

Study Finds More Woes Following Foster Care

Erik Eckholm

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/07/us/07foster.html?src=me>

Only half the youths who had turned 18 and “aged out” of foster care were employed by their mid-20s. Six in 10 men had been convicted of a crime, and three in four women, many of them with children of their own, were receiving some form of public assistance. Only six in 100 had completed even a community college degree.

The dismal outlook for youths who are thrust into a shaky adulthood from the foster care system — now numbering some 30,000 annually — has been documented with new precision by a long-term study released Wednesday, the largest to follow such children over many years.

Researchers studied the outcomes for 602 youths in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin, and compared them with their peers who had not been in foster care. Most youths had entered the foster care system in their early teens and then were required to leave it at 18 or, in the case of Illinois, 21.

“We took them away from their parents on the assumption that we as a society would do a better job of raising them,” said Mark Courtney, a social work researcher at the University of Washington who led the study with colleagues from the Partners for Our Children program at Washington and the Chapin Hall center at the University of Chicago. “We’ve invested a lot of money and time in their care, and by many measures they’re still doing very poorly.”

Over the last decade, the federal government and many states have started to assist former foster care youths with education grants, temporary housing subsidies and, in some places, extra years of state custody and support. The new data showed that just over half of them are doing reasonably well and benefit from such aid. But they throw a spotlight, researchers said, on two groups that need more sweeping and lasting help.

About one-fourth of the people in the study, mainly women, are receiving public aid and struggling to raise their own children, usually without a high school degree. Researchers found that one in five in a second group, mainly men, are badly floundering, with multiple criminal convictions, low education and incomes and, often, mental health or substance abuse problems.

Once they leave foster care, these most troubled youths often have no reliable adults to advise them or provide emotional support, said Gary Stangler, director of the Jim Casey

Youth Opportunities Initiative, a private foundation. “When these kids make a mistake, it’s life altering, they have nothing to fall back on,” Mr. Stangler said.

Finding a mentor who provides “that backbone you need” has made all the difference, said Cameron Anderson, 21, of Tampa, Fla., who entered foster care at 15 after he got into trouble with the law, then lived in group homes.

Mr. Anderson, who is now in community college and works at a printer cartridge company, receives education and other financial aid that has helped him keep an apartment. But he has made some missteps since moving out on his own, he said, like not paying bills in full so he could buy shoes and hanging out with old friends who were bad influences.

Last fall, he was introduced to a mentor, an investor in Tampa, by a Casey program, Connected by 25. The two now speak daily, Mr. Anderson said, discussing “school and life in general, even to the point where he’ll say, ‘Hey, are you using protection?’ ”

Had he had such a relationship earlier, Mr. Anderson said, “it would have saved me from a ton of bridges I’ve had to cross.”

While younger children are often adopted when their parents’ rights are terminated, fewer prospective parents want to adopt teenagers. Recent research, including the new study, shows that most foster children, even though they have been removed from their homes, maintain ties with a parent or other relative. Some agencies are trying to support such ties or to locate relatives who might adopt the children or provide long-term support.

Illinois, New York, Vermont and the District of Columbia now allow youths to remain in foster care to age 21, and some states help with transitional housing.

Congress in 2008 passed a law providing matching money to states that extend foster care to age 21, something that the authors of the study call for. But in the face of large budget deficits, few states have signed on so far.



Seattle Post-Intelligencer

The Associated Press story as it appeared in the Seattle Post Intelligencer

Study: Transition out of foster care needs support

Martha Irvine

http://www.seattlepi.com/local/6420ap_us_foster_care.html?source=myspi

Tasha Collett spent most of her teen years shuffling between so many different foster families that she's lost count of just how many there were. By the time she aged out of the Iowa system at age 18, she ended up living in homeless shelters, on and off.

Not exactly a foundation for success. But Collett, now 21, still managed to land an apartment and a part-time job at a drug store. She's also studying to become a registered nurse at a medical college in Des Moines.

"I'm very blessed," Collett says, making a statement that's confirmed when you look at the often grim findings from a long-term study on older youth who've been in foster care.

According to the study, released Wednesday, a quarter of the youth didn't have a high school diploma or GED. Only about half were working, compared with 72 percent of their peers who weren't in foster care.

And almost half reported at least one hardship during the study, such as an eviction or utility shut-off, while nearly a third said they sometimes didn't have enough to eat.

"On average, they're not doing well when compared to their peers," says Mark Courtney, the study's lead author and the research and development director at the University of Washington's Partners for Our Children program. That's been especially true in tough economic times.

Still, when you take a deeper look at the numbers, it wasn't all bad news, Courtney said, especially when young people had more support.

He noted, for instance, that a third of the young people studied were, like Collett, making a relatively successful transition to adulthood. Another quarter, whom he dubbed "emerging adults," were living with friends or relatives but were often working or going to school and poised to make the transition with support.

There were other glimmers of hope in the study, which provided a multiyear glimpse of teens and 20-somethings in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin as they made the transition out of the foster care system and into adulthood.

Illinois is the only state of those three that offered youth the option to remain wards of the state until age 21. So when comparing the outcomes for youth who were tracked until age 23 or 24, the researchers found that:

- Foster youth in Illinois, by the end of the study, were more likely to have gone to college for at least one year - 44 percent in Illinois compared with 26 percent in the other two states.
- The longer a youth remained in care beyond age 18, the higher their wages - likely a direct result of their schooling, researchers said.
- Young women who remained in the system also were more likely to delay pregnancy, at least until age 19 and sometimes longer.

The findings are based on a series of interviews that researchers from the University of Washington and the University of Chicago began in 2002 with 732 young older teens in the foster care systems in the three states and concluded in 2008 with 603 remaining participants, when they were 23 and 24.

There were certainly signs that aging out of the system at 21, instead of 18, wasn't a cure-all.

By age 23 or 24, most of the Illinois participants who attended college were no more likely to have a college degree, for instance.

The study also found that while staying in the system until age 21 delayed homelessness, it didn't prevent it.

"When you look at developmentally where 21-year-olds are at, and you put that against the economic crisis that we're in, it makes sense that that alone wouldn't be enough," says Kathi Crowe, executive director of the National Foster Care Coalition

Still, she and others who track foster care trends said the study provided more evidence that keeping young people in the foster care system longer - something most states don't do - was a positive step.

"It seems irresponsible that more states haven't moved the age to 21 by now, given all the sound arguments there are for it," says Curtis McMillen, a professor of social work at Washington University in St. Louis who has studied the foster system in his own state.

For her own part, Collett - the 21-year-old in Iowa - says she was anxious to be on her own at age 18 and wouldn't have wanted to remain a ward of the state.

But she agreed that having an extensive support system has been the key to keeping her on track.

She is among those who receive tuition and housing money from state and federal sources. She also has a mentor through a program called Mentor of Iowa and still gets regular guidance from the staff at a local homeless shelter where she once stayed.

One foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, helped her open a savings account with matching funds of up to \$1,000 each year aimed at teaching money management skills to young people who've grown up in foster care.

More help for young people like Collett could come from the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which passed two years ago and - among other things - provides some additional funding for states to extend care and services until age 21. But so far, tight budgets have put that on hold.

Beyond that, Courtney called for more focus on foster youth whose transition to adulthood is hampered by anything from a lack of childcare options to addiction and mental health issues.

"We need to look at the consequences of not dealing with this," he says.



College Diplomas, Income Elude Foster Care Alums

John Kelly

http://www.youthtoday.org/publication/article.cfm?article_id=3938

A study being released today of youths who aged out of foster care in three Midwestern states paints a grim picture of their young adult years: the roughly 600 people being tracked have had almost no success obtaining college degrees, more than half are unemployed and their median annual income is \$8,000.

“To the extent that self-sufficiency is a marker of a successful transition to adulthood, these young people, as a group, are not faring well,” wrote authors of the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, the fourth analysis from a long-term project to study youth who aged out of care in Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin.

About 94 percent of those tracked – all of whom are now 23 or 24 years old – did not complete even a two-year associate’s degree. Only 15 of the 602 adults reported getting a four-year college degree.

The former foster care youth did not fare well in other categories of stability either:

Employment: “Needed to work” was the answer more frequently given by respondents who dropped out of school, but for many it was a short-lived plan. Just under half of the former foster care youth were employed at the time of the latest interviews.

Income: The median income of interviewees was \$8,000, which is \$10,000 less than the median income of similarly aged adults from a study of the general U.S. population. At the same time, 9 percent of women and 12 percent of men reported that they had been paid by someone to have sex.

Housing: Nearly a quarter of the interviewees said they had been homeless at some time since leaving foster care, but less than 1 percent reported current homelessness. Of young adults in the study, 7 percent were in jail or prison, compared with only one-tenth of one percent of same-age males in the general population who were locked up.

Parenting: About 44 percent of males interviewed for the study had at least one child, and only 41 percent of those fathers lived with their children. Only 18 percent of same-age males in the general population have children, and 65 percent of them live with their children.

Criminal Activity: A staggering eight of 10 males in the study said they had been arrested at least once since the age of 18. In contrast, only 42 percent reported an arrest since 2007. About 57 percent of females said they had been arrested since 18.

Victimization: Former foster care youths were about four times more likely than other adults their age to receive a random beating or one committed in connection with a robbery.

One area where most former foster care youths reported a modicum of stability was food security. About seven of 10 interviewees reported at least marginal food security, and only 10 percent reported that they “sometimes or often” had “not [had] enough to eat.” Not coincidentally, food stamps are by far the government benefit most received by former foster care youths, according to this study.

Class of 2002

The Midwest Evaluations, conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington, follow youth from Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois. Participants first were interviewed at 17 in either 2002 or 2003, and then again at ages 19, 21 and 23. Another round of interviews will start in two years.

Over time, said study author Mark Courtney, the cohort has split into distinct groups of young adults:

--Accelerated or emerging adults, who are relatively successful or are on their way to that status;

--Struggling parents, mostly young mothers whose lives are dominated by a child born to them in a difficult economic situation; and

--Troubled adults – mostly males – whose lives have been marred by homelessness, mental health problems and criminal justice involvement.

Sadly, Courtney said, significantly more young adults end up in the latter two cohorts.

Lack of Knowledge on What Works

Though little is known about the long-term history of outcomes for the approximately 26,500 foster youth who exit care each year, the findings are not a ringing endorsement for current efforts to help the oldest youth in the child welfare system. Most states’ actions are undertaken with the help of federal money through the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, often referred to as the Chaffee Act in recognition of its author, Sen. John Chaffee (D-R.I.).

The Chaffee Act doubled to \$140 million the annual federal awards to states to establish independent living programs for older foster care youth. The act also created a smaller

pot of money that is distributed to states for education and training vouchers (funded last year at \$45 million).

Study author Courtney said he does not believe all efforts undertaken with Chaffee Act funds have been a failure, “but certainly they are not a success...in states I’m looking at.” All three states in the study receive Chaffee Act funds.

One problem in determining success and failure is the dearth of information about how the Chaffee money is spent. The act required the Department of Health and Human Services to start collecting data and outcomes from states by 2000, but for a decade the development of a collection system inexplicably was delayed.

Chaffee is “an example of a program that allowed 1,000 flowers to bloom, but we’re not tending to the garden in any systematic way,” said Courtney. “We’re way behind after 10 years.”

Under new regulations, states are required to begin collecting data for a National Youth in Transition Database in October, though there is speculation that some states will opt to incur a financial penalty rather than initiate data collection that may cost more than the penalty.

It is likely that Chaffee-funded programs have increased the number of accelerated and emerging adults, Courtney said, and a recent law enabling states to match federal funds in an effort to keep youth in foster care until age 21 could reap similar benefits.

But for the large population of struggling or seriously troubled former foster care youth, Courtney said, “there’s nothing out there right now ... there’s not a lot of policy aimed at them.”



Education a struggle for many foster children

Deborah Circelli

<http://www.news-journalonline.com/news/local/east-volusia/2010/04/07/education-a-struggle-for-many-foster-children.html>

Four years in foster care and living in four group and foster homes didn't deter Shyrod Williams from continuing her education and setting her eyes on becoming a dental hygienist.

The 23-year-old from Holly Hill is in the dental program at Daytona State College and caring for her 3-year-old daughter, Bryonna. She's also finding time soon to mentor foster girls in the same DeLand group home where she once lived.

She tries to look "at the positive sides of things and keep my faith" while trying to beat the odds -- foster youths have a greater chance of not finishing high school or college and becoming homeless than others their age.

A new national study being released today at a national child welfare symposium in Washington, D.C., shows only 6 percent of young people who left foster care had finished two- or four-year college degrees by age 24 and about a quarter did not have a high school diploma or a GED. Fewer than half surveyed were working and nearly 40 percent had been homeless or slept on friends' couches since leaving foster care.

The study by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington was based on interviews with more than 600 youths in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa. The youths were interviewed while in foster care and then again about six years later.

National child welfare officials said the results mirror what foster youths face in every state. Local child welfare officials are hoping to reduce the risks in Volusia and Flagler counties with programs, including mentoring, to help foster teens build relationships and life skills.

Nearly 60 percent of the males interviewed had been convicted of a crime, the study shows. Three-quarters of the females and one-third of the males received government benefits in the past year. There were also concerns about a large number of females becoming pregnant.

Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, one sponsor of the symposium where the study is being released, said the study shows there's no "substitute for emotional connections and the support a family provides."

He said there needs to be more focus to reconnect foster youths with biological parents or relatives.

Locally, mentoring programs through Community Partnership for Children, the local foster care agency, connect foster youths with business and other leaders. The state's Road to Independence program also helps provide monthly stipends to former foster youth 18 to 23, if they continue with their education.

However, the Florida Legislature is considering reducing the stipend, which advocates worry will leave more former foster youth struggling to maintain housing and their education.

Last fiscal year, 39 local foster children turned 18. Twenty-seven were either in school or just graduated, including three who were in college. The remainder either moved out of town, dropped out of school or their status was unknown.

Christine Davenport, executive director of Children's Home Society, which manages the Road to Independence and Independent Living program, said she's seeing more foster teens recognize the importance of having a skill or trade.

"It's so hard to mitigate the trauma of abuse and neglect and all the losses that these youths have experienced over the years," Davenport said. "But we are really now making a stronger effort than ever to help them succeed."

For Williams, she knows having been in foster care puts her at a disadvantage. She was removed from her parents' care because of issues with abuse and neglect, she said. She doesn't have a lot of family to rely on, though she gets help sometimes from her father and her child's father.

The state pays for her college classes and she received a monthly stipend of about \$1,200 through a state program for foster youths but that ended when she turned 23 in August. She saved money, but things are getting tight. She's looking for a part-time job in the dental field while continuing in the dental program.

Williams, who is president of a youth advisory board for Children's Home Society, also recently finished training to become a mentor to other foster girls.

"Some of these girls are already out there on the limb and vulnerable to things going on out there," Williams said. "I want to encourage them to be positive and make the right choices out of life."

RADIO



Report: Foster Kids Face Tough Times After Age 18

Pam Fessler

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125594259>

It's hard turning 18 — moving out, finding a job, going to college. But many foster children have to do it by themselves, without the lifeline to parents and home that helps many teens ease into independence.

A major report out Wednesday says that many former foster kids have a tough time out on their own. When they age out of the system, they're more likely than their peers to end up in jail, homeless or pregnant. They're also less likely to have a job or go to college.

Life can be a struggle for these young people, even with help from the government and nonprofit agencies.

Meet Josh Mendoza, a shy young man from Tampa, Fla., with soulful eyes and a hint of dark hair along his upper lip. He lived in 14 different group homes after he was removed from his mother's care more than two years ago because she used drugs.

But now he's just turned 18, and like 30,000 other foster teens this year, he's suddenly out on his own.

"This is my apartment," Mendoza says as he opens the door to a ground floor unit at an apartment complex in Tampa. The living room is empty except for a navy blue futon and a small TV. The white walls are bare. He has only been here for two weeks. There's food in the cupboard, but not a lot: some spaghetti, Cream of Wheat and cereal.

Living on your own is a little weird, says Mendoza. It's kind of lonely and a challenge, he says. His only cooking experience in foster care was heating soup in the microwave. He looks at a frying pan on top of his new stove. The bottom is covered with congealed fat.

"Yesterday, I was trying to cook, but I don't think it turned out too good," Mendoza says. "With the burgers, it kind of got burnt."

But unlike many foster care teens, Mendoza has been getting some help.

Nick Reschke is Mendoza's transition specialist, a kind of big brother/parent provided to foster youth in the Tampa area. He helped Mendoza find his apartment, sign the lease and move in.

"The day he turned 18, we went to pick up his check, went grocery shopping, went over a list of what he needs, what his budgets are," says Reschke, who also helped Mendoza pick up some donated furniture and supplies. "And then after that, Josh and I, we pretty much just cleaned the apartment up, wiped down the counters, wiped down the cabinets and set up his house. And that was his first night."

It was also Mendoza's 18th birthday.

"We have an abrupt cutoff, like most states," says Diane Zambito, who runs Connected by 25, a Tampa nonprofit that is trying to smooth the transition for former foster care youth. "We go from 'you're in foster care, where you may handle \$10 a month' to 'you're responsible for everything.'"

Zambito says things have come a long way since 10 years ago, when some foster kids here turned 18, put their belongings in a plastic bag and were taken to the nearest homeless shelter because they had nowhere else to go. But she says it's still not enough.

"We need to offer something for these young people other than, 'Here's Option A: Fall off the cliff,'" she says.

Clinging To The Edge

The new study — from Chapin Hall, a policy research center at the University of Chicago — finds that those who age out of foster care are not exactly falling off a cliff, but they are desperately clinging to the edge.

Mark Courtney is with Partners for Our Children, a policy center at the University of Washington. Over the past eight years, Courtney and colleagues from Chapin Hall have been following the progress of more than 600 former foster kids.

"Many of them are faring poorly," says Courtney. "Less than half were employed at 23, 24. They're much less likely to have finished high school, less likely to be enrolled in college or have a college degree."

In fact, by age 24, only 6 percent have two- or four-year degrees. More than two-thirds of the young women have children. Nearly 60 percent of the males have been convicted of a crime. Almost a quarter were homeless at some point after leaving foster care.

"Those children are our children, the children of society, of the state," says Courtney. "I would argue that we have no business taking them into care and then keeping them until they're in the transition to adulthood, unless we're going to try to do a good job of that."

They're trying in Tampa.

Two weeks after his 18th birthday, Josh Mendoza meets his advisers at a GED program for those aging out of care.

"All right, so Josh, you know we do this once a month," says Sarah Hart, the program coordinator. "You've been in the hot seat before, so let's start by getting an update on your progress."

Hart is concerned because the first day Mendoza was on his own, in his new apartment, he didn't come to school.

"Why is that, Josh?" she asks.

Mendoza sheepishly explains that his alarm clock didn't go off and he missed his bus. He says he had no other way to get there. Hart responds as a parent might.

"My question is, did you call Mr. Mark or Miss Colette to let them know you weren't going to be here that day?" she asks.

"No," says Josh.

"OK. You know, those things are going to happen," Hart responds. "You've just turned 18, and you're getting adjusted to coming from a new place. I mean, I get all that. If that happens again, though, you have to call your teachers and let them know. That's part of being responsible."

Mendoza knows he can't afford to screw up. His \$1,256 monthly stipend from the state is contingent on him staying in school.

"If I lose my check, I'm going to the street," he says. "And then I wouldn't know what to do, or who to ask, or who to turn to."

Researchers say former foster kids who have someone to rely on do better than those who don't. But right now, only a handful of states provide foster care beyond 18. While several other states are planning to do so in response to a new federal law, state budget problems could put a crimp in those plans. In Florida, there's even talk about cutting the stipend for former foster kids in half.

But Courtney says this is also a resilient group. By age 24, about half of those surveyed in his new study appear to be doing OK. Their lives have begun to stabilize.

Katrena Wingo of Tampa considers herself one of those people. At 24, she has a job and a place for her and her 3-year-old son, Ajai, to live. It's a tiny duplex, but with a yard big enough for her to play with him when she comes home from work.

But it's been a long haul getting here. Wingo entered foster care as an infant and stayed until her 18th birthday. After she aged out, she was OK for a while, but then she got pregnant. She stopped working and spent months moving from one friend's sofa to another.

"And at the time I wasn't going to school," she says. "So it was hard."

Eventually, with the help of friends, some family members and the nonprofit Connected by 25, she began to turn her life around. Wingo says perhaps the biggest eye opener was having a child of her own.

"It's just like, OK, you have another life in here that you brought into this world. And now everything that you do, everything that you own, everything that you spend, is not only yours or for you, it's for your child now. So he's your No. 1 priority," she says.

Wingo still depends on food stamps — and on her landlord to cut her some slack when the rent is due. But she's back in school trying to earn her degree. She hopes someday to become a counselor for troubled youth.

And Josh Mendoza? He says that if he gets his college degree, his goal is to run group homes.



NPR's Talk of the Nation

<http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=125729965&m=125729963>

NEAL CONAN, host:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan, in Washington.

Every year, almost 30,000 kids age out of the foster care system after childhoods when many move from house to house and school to school. For most foster kids, the day they turn 18, they're suddenly on their own, responsible to find a place to live, manage their money, they're suddenly on their own, responsible to find a place to live, manage their money, their shopping, their clothing, their food and try to continue their education, all when most of their peers still get help from mom and dad.

New research confirms the common-sense conclusion: A lot of former foster kids have a hard time with all of these abrupt changes. They're less likely to find a job, go to college or even find a place to sleep every night.

If you were once in foster care, what happened when you left the system? What made a difference for you? What might have helped? Tell us your story. Our phone number is 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation at our Web site. That's at npr.org. Just click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Joining me here today in Studio 3A is Jeremy Long, who aged out of the foster care system three years ago, and he is in many ways an exception: now a senior at the University of Northern Colorado, also works with current and former foster youth as a member of the Bridging the Gap Youth Leadership Board in Denver. Jeremy Long, nice to have you with us today on TALK OF THE NATION.

Mr. JEREMY LONG (Member, Bridging the Gap Youth Leadership Board): Thank you for having me.

CONAN: And tell us what that day is like. Suddenly, you've been in the system your whole life. Suddenly, you turn 18.

Mr. LONG: Yeah, for me, it was actually an okay position, just for the fact that being in foster care, I had a very positive experience. So like most foster youth, when they age out

at the age of 18, they're kind of on their own, but I was able to really create those networks and those connections that are still in my life today that have really helped me get to where I am.

CONAN: And you were fortunate to have just one foster parent through your entire experience.

Mr. LONG: Yes.

CONAN: And how has that helped?

Mr. LONG: It's actually been extremely beneficial, just for the fact that I didn't have to get used to numerous different families, which is very hard on the emotional state of a lot of foster youth. And to this day, we're still in connection, and to this day, she's still my mom. So...

CONAN: And to this day, she's still your mom. And that's really important. That's one of the things we learn from this new research that's out today: continuing relationship with caring adults. And how is she doing?

Mr. LONG: She's doing quite well.

CONAN: Good. And so she's putting up with you.

Mr. LONG: Yes, still.

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: Still. Well, we'll have to see when you get back. We're talking about foster kids, and we'd like you to join the conversation. If you aged out of the foster care system, give us a call: 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org. And let's turn to Joy, Joy's with us on the line from Charlotte.

JOY (Caller): Hi, how are you?

CONAN: I'm well, thank you.

JOY: Good.

CONAN: Did you age out of foster care?

JOY: I certainly did. I aged out like everyone else at age 18, but I was in college. I had gone into college when I was 17, and so I knew that I would have that extra subsidy per month as long as I was in school.

CONAN: The student loan.

JOY: Well, it wasn't quite a student loan. There was a subsidy that stayed in effect until I was 21. The trick is that I didn't graduate by the time I was 21, and so I was suddenly left without that income stream and ended up relying entirely on student loans.

CONAN: And that can be tricky.

JOY: It can be very tricky. I went on from there to graduate school, still relying on student loans. And now I'm struggling because even though I'm a working professional in an executive director job at a nonprofit, I have over \$200,000 in loan debt that I have to figure out how to pay back.

CONAN: And, of course, a lot of people have that problem, but it's certainly not easy for anybody. I wonder, as you were considering this problem when you were 18 and then again at 21, did you feel abandoned?

JOY: Well, of course I did, right? Because I had - you know, I didn't have parents that were paying for school for me like other people were. I didn't feel as though there was anyone there really looking out for my interests, and I really felt as though at 18, all the decisions that I needed to make were encumbered on me without any wise advice.

CONAN: And is there a special feeling of accomplishment now that you've gotten to where you are?

JOY: Oh, I think certainly. I just would go back and have, obviously, you know, done it on a little bit more of a maybe fiscally responsible manner.

CONAN: And maybe that five-year college program.

JOY: Right, right. No, without any question. And so I think, you know, I would go back and attribute that to say, well, I accomplished a lot on my own two feet, but really, I would probably be in a much better situation had I had responsible, loving, caring adults helping me with those decisions.

CONAN: Joy, thanks very much, and congratulations.

JOY: Thank you.

CONAN: Good luck with those loans.

JOY: Thanks. Bye.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Joining us now is Mark Courtney. He is research and development director of Partners For Our Children at the University of Washington School of Social Work. He's been following youth who have aged out of foster care since 2002, lead researcher for a new report from Partners for our Children and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Thanks very much for being here with us in Studio 3A today.

Dr. MARK COURTNEY (Research and Development Director, Partners For Our Children, School of Social Work, University of Washington): Good to be here.

CONAN: And Joy, who we heard from, and Jeremy, who we heard from, they are -well, it's nice to hear from them, but they're exceptions.

Dr. COURTNEY: Well, they're exceptions, but they actually represent an important group. I mean, we've been following 700 young people for a number of years now, from 17 at this point to 23, 24, and on average, yes, young people transitioning from foster care as a group aren't faring well.

They're - less than half of them are employed at 23, very high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system, lots of struggling parents, rely on public assistance. But they're - you know, actually Joy and Jeremy represent maybe as many as half of the young people aging out that are doing okay, but struggling to do okay.

They're working really hard. They finished high school, and they have some college. It sounds like Joy has, you know, more than some college.

CONAN: More than some, and more than some debt, too.

Dr. COURTNEY: Yeah, and that's unusual. I mean, we find, you know, only about six percent of young people we're talking to at 23, 24 have any kind of college degree.

CONAN: And more than four times more likely than that not to have a high school degree.

Dr. COURTNEY: That's right. That's right. The young men are six times more likely than their peers to be convicted of a crime. One-quarter of the population are really struggling parents who are barely making ends meet. They're still parenting, they haven't lost their kids.

And then we've got a big group that, in fact, have lost their kids, have been involved in the criminal system, et cetera. So I think the trick is following the philosophy that Joy and Jeremy are talking about, is to continue to be a parent, in a sense.

The child welfare system took these young people away from their parents and kind of abandons that role at 18. And like any family, you've got a range of the family, some that are going to go right to college, some that are going to need a lot of help. I think that's true of these young people, as well.

CONAN: Jeremy, let me ask you: What do you tell foster youth as they approach their 18th birthday, people who may not have been as fortunate as you?

Mr. LONG: I pretty much just tell them that, I mean, even though that life has thrown a lot of unfortunate circumstances your way, if you have the mental capacity and hopefully the proper connections, you can easily overcome them and become successful in whichever way you choose.

CONAN: Easily?

Mr. LONG: Not always easily, but for some people, like six percent of us do have those connections that are definitely going to help us get there.

CONAN: And the emotional part of it - yes, it's a lot of hard work, but the emotional part of it, for so many people, that feeling of abandonment - of course, Joy mentioned it. There's not much you can do about it, but there it is. And the huge responsibilities: a lot of well, responsible adults, theoretically, have problems getting their laundry done on time, much less kids suddenly thrown out on their own at the age of 18.

Mr. LONG: Yeah.

CONAN: What's there to say about that? Yes, of course.

Mr. LONG: It's definitely unfortunate. I think with the emotional state, I was fortunate enough in foster care to be placed in therapy, which really helped me. It definitely got my emotional state where I was capable of handling any situation.

CONAN: All right. Let's get another caller in on the conversation. April joins us from Minneapolis.

APRIL (Caller): Oh, hi, Neal. How is it going today?

CONAN: Oh, not too bad.

APRIL: Excellent. I was very fortunate. When I got kicked out of foster care at age 18, I had a phenomenal social worker because, you know, I was completely terrified. I had no life skills. I wasn't taught anything. You know, I didn't have any job or anything that I could fall back on.

And my social worker, because, you know, he had - his own county would not let me stay in the foster care system because I was not in college. He found - he went out. He found another home, a foster care home, that was sitting unused in another county, and he basically got special dispensation from his bosses to basically funnel me money every month, and then I would just pay these people as boarders in their household.

So I wasn't in the foster care system, but I was still renting. You know, I still had a place to stay. I still had a roof over my head. And that six months that I got with that home made all the difference in the world to me.

I was - you know, instead of being forced to, you know, get any job I could, a minimum wage job, get into drug dealing, get into whatever I could to, you know, have food and a roof over my head, instead I was able to, you know, get a nice job, you know, in a stable company.

And because of that, you know, I have a great job now. I'm married. My life is really awesome. You know, if it wasn't for that social worker who really, like, stuck his neck out, I would have been - I would have been lost, like most foster kids who get kicked out of the system.

CONAN: And I hope you invite him every Thanksgiving.

APRIL: Oh, I do. In fact, I'm one of the few kids that he still sees on a regular basis. You know, I just saw an article in the New York Times about, you know, about how few foster kids actually make it, you know, after they get kicked out of foster care.

He said I was one of just a handful of the thousands of kids he's seen, you know, who made it into the University of Minnesota and who's actually been successful, which is really sad. But he's one of my best friends, and I, you know, I basically consider him my dad at this point.

CONAN: Well, you should. It sounds like he really went out of his way to help. April, thanks so much, and continued good luck to you.

APRIL: Thank you very much, Neal. You have a great day now.

CONAN: You, too. And Mark Courtney, that's another heartwarming story, but by the edge of her - the skin of her teeth, a social worker willing to go out on the edge.

Dr. COURTNEY: Yeah. We certainly need people like that. We need adults in the lives of these young people to help them negotiate this transition to adulthood. But we don't want to rely on the good graces of that, and I think...

CONAN: Of happenstance. Yes, there ought to be a system for that.

Dr. COURTNEY: Right. And you hear her worker says you're the exception, really. And I think that the trick is for us to get more serious about having policies that increase the likelihood that young people who actually could go on to college - I think almost half of these young people probably could pretty much immediately go to college. They're not. You've got some exceptions that do.

So there are some things we can do to support them in terms of continued housing, support, adults in their lives. But right now, almost everywhere in the country basically kicks these young people out at 18.

The handful of places that don't - one of which, Illinois, is in our study - I think do a much better job of ensuring those kinds of connections are there. And you begin to see more young people going to school, less homelessness right off the bat at 18, delayed pregnancies, when you continue to act like a parent - you know, when we as a society, through our child welfare system, continue to act like a parent.

CONAN: Well, there's some questions about the efficacy of that extra help, from 18 to 21. Of course, from 18 to 21, they're going to do better. After that, they don't seem to do much better than the kids who got out at 18.

Dr. COURTNEY: Well, we've looked at a few things. I mean, for example, it looks like extending care - now, we only have Illinois. Let's be clear. This is one approach to extending care to 21. But it looks like it delays homelessness, doesn't prevent it altogether.

It looks like - in fact, young people are more likely to have college. They're much more likely to have some college by the age of 23, 24, if they were allowed to remain in care. But they're not necessarily more likely to have a degree by then. So I think it's a mixed story.

CONAN: We'll continue talking about the new research on kids who age out of foster care and continue to talk with Jeremy Long, one of the success stories, about to graduate from college in Colorado.

Stay with us. We want to hear from you. If you have aged out of foster care, tell us your story: 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org. Stay with us. I'm Neal Conan, TALK OF THE NATION, NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington.

Since 2002, researchers have been following some 700 youth in foster care. They interviewed the kids at various times as they got older to get a sense of what happens to these young people when they leave foster care. Results are not encouraging.

While some young people do well and manage to find jobs and housing and schooling, far too many end up homeless, drop out of school, are unemployed. Sadly, many of them end up convicted of a crime.

Our focus today is what happens to youth when they age out of foster care. We want to hear from you if that is your story. Give us a call, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. What happened to you when you left the system? What made a difference? What might have helped?

Our guests are Jeremy Long, who aged out of foster care three years ago, a member now of Bridging the Gap Youth Leadership Board in Denver, working with current and former foster youth and about to graduate from the University of Northern Colorado.

Also with us, Mark Courtney, who conducted a lot of that research that we're talking about. He works at the University of Washington School of Social Work and a lead researcher on that report at the Chapin Hall and the University of Chicago. They're both with us here in Studio 3A. Let's get another caller on the line and go to Michael, Michael calling us from Portland, Oregon.

MICHAEL (Caller): Hi, long-time listener, first-time caller.

CONAN: Thank you for that.

MICHAEL: I worked with children in foster care for 15 years, teenagers, and the issue is more than aging out. We had the IOP program, the independent living program, which by

law when a child is 16 in foster care, they can voluntarily participate in the program to teach them the skills they will need to become independent adults.

The problem was that the system is set up so that they don't get what they need, which is stability, predictability and consistency. The workload is so heavy that workers change all the time. They not only change foster homes, they change workers.

So kids never get to establish that adult - because when you're a social worker with this group or population of kids, you are effectively a surrogate father. And when you don't have the opportunity to stay with kids and support them through - and particularly, all across the country, they have cut mental health services to these kids.

CONAN: And I see Mark Courtney, you're shaking your head in agreement.

MICHAEL: They get to see a therapist now, every other week, and then the therapist changes all the time.

CONAN: I just wanted to get a comment from Mark Courtney on this.

Dr. COURTNEY: I think that this is he points out something very important, that the young people in care, in addition to coming in care with lots of challenges. I mean, one thing that the audience might not understand is that most of these young people aging out actually came into care as adolescents.

So they were in difficult situations, troubled homes for a long time. Then they come into care, and quite often, they do bounce around a lot. They don't necessarily get all the help they need. And in our research, some of the most important predictors we see of later success, are things like being on track in school, having your mental health needs addressed while you're in care, and the kind of social support you get from adults.

But I think we have to keep in mind, most of these young people actually have families. So it's a bit tricky, right. It's not the case that they're orphans, and they don't have families. They came into care as adolescents.

And so we need to help them maintain the healthy relationships that exist in their family, but then also as this person was saying - obviously a really long-time social worker - we have to be surrogate parents, as well, and it's complicated because they have a lot of people in their lives.

CONAN: Jeremy, you went into foster care at age 13, correct?

Mr. LONG: Yes.

CONAN: And then later had the advantage of therapy.

Mr. LONG: I did, and it was actually a nice situation for me. I was one of those fortunate youth that I had two therapists, but that was over the span of four years. And the reason

my first one left was because of retirement, and then we went into another one, who was very stable and was there until the end.

CONAN: So very helpful to you, and would you recommend it for a lot of the kids in your situation?

Mr. LONG: I would. I would say it's definitely helped me a lot.

CONAN: All right, thank you. Michael, thanks very much for the call, appreciate it.

MICHAEL: Thank you.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Let's go next to Michelle(ph), Michelle calling us from San Francisco.

MICHELLE (Caller): Hi, Neal, thanks for having me.

CONAN: Sure, go ahead please.

MICHELLE: So I came out of foster care when I was 17, went into college only because of foster care, pretty much. My parents didn't go to school. So that helped. That was a benefit. I got a job over at the dorms, where I pretty much paid for my living there. So that saved me a lot.

But I really wish that I would have had a network of other alumni, foster care alumni, just to know that I'm not alone, that it's okay that I don't do my laundry all the time, that, you know, I am late on rent. But it really was a challenge knowing, deciding and I didn't learn until I was 26, that you can't have it all. You can't have a car and have an apartment, have a job and go to school at the same time. One of them has to stop.

So I'm trying to do, for my part, is I've had a radio show for a little bit on the Internet, called "Independent Party." But, so I'm trying to do something to just for that group. But there's nothing really out there as far as I was aware of, of other foster care kids who were making it and what decisions they had. I mean, there wasn't too many role models available. It was pretty much fend for yourself.

CONAN: And Mark Courtney, that sounds like a great idea, that foster kids could help support each other, and are you involved in that, Jeremy?

Mr. LONG: I am. I'm actually a member of the Foster Care Alumni Association of America, which is based around foster care alumni coming together and discussing their successful stories, if not...

CONAN: And how would people like Michelle find other people in her situation?

MICHELLE: Yeah, how can I get involved?

Mr. LONG: Yeah, definitely. Definitely check out the Web site, which I believe is FCAA.org. And then also an organization called Foster Club. It's an online national

network for youth that have been in that are in care and that have been in care. And there's people aged 15, all the way until 80, that'll definitely discuss stories with you.

CONAN: And if your pencil wasn't out, Michelle, we'll get that information and post a link to it on our Web site at npr.org.

MICHELLE: I appreciate that. Thank you.

CONAN: And good luck with the radio show, Michelle. There's a future in that.

(Soundbite of laughter)

MICHELLE: Thank you.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Let's see if we can go next to this is Lacey(ph), Lacey with us from Winston-Salem.

LACEY (Caller): Hi, good afternoon.

CONAN: Hi, good afternoon.

LACEY: I aged out of foster care in 1993 at the age of 21, and the thing that made me able to age out at 21 was because I was in school at the time. Actually, I had got kicked out of three semesters, but then I went on to do volunteer work, and I was kind of working and, you know, being independent, and so I was able to remain until I was 21.

But it definitely is a very scary prospect when you get to that point that you know that your time is coming up, and you know, you've got you're counting down the months and the weeks and the days, and then, you know, it's kind like a void on the other side of that birthday.

CONAN: You knew that, in a way, you were alone, but not like that.

LACEY: Right, yeah, absolutely. And one of the guests mentioned that, you know, there's nothing to go back to. And it's really true that, you know, most people, most people who leave home after the age of 18, 19 or 21, if they fall on hard times, they have a family that they can possibly go back to sometimes.

But you don't have that when you're coming out of foster care. You can't go back into foster care. You can't, you know, say okay, well, you know, I need a little help. I can't pay my rent. So I need to move back in with you. You know, so it's really hard.

But I do want to say, one of I think Jeremy said something about, you know, the state has taken custody, and, you know, they need to continue parenting beyond the age of 21. And I realize that doesn't necessarily mean residential. Like, you're not going to care for the people who have aged out by giving them a place to live, necessarily, but just, you know, some means of support and assistance and networking.

But one benefit, I have to say, was that even after leaving foster care, I was able to always get federal aid as a student because I was a ward of the state. So I was able to get decent financial aid just by checking off that box that I was a ward of the state. So I was really that was definitely a benefit.

CONAN: All right, Lacey, thanks very much, and good luck to you, too.

LACEY: Thank you.

CONAN: Bye-bye. This is obviously something that's available to the kids who do go to school. For those who don't, and you're talking about extended care from states, well, I think every state in the union is facing terrible, terrible budget crises at this time. It's not a propitious moment to ask for additional funding.

Dr. COURTNEY: No, it isn't, except there has been a change in federal law, which would allow states, starting this next year, to continue their foster care programs, have the same partnership with the federal government, get 50 to 75 cents on the dollar to operate that program. Very few states are doing that.

I guess the argument I would make in favor of it is that we've heard now from a lot of young and not-so-young people who are in care, who have gone to college. And in many cases, the difference between making it or not, you can have financial aid, but if you don't have a place to live, you're not going to go to school. And so that's kind of part of that parenting role.

But there's another whole group, large group, that are becoming a serious cost to society. They're ending up in jail. They're having children at a young age. They're losing custody of those children. So from a cost-benefit analysis, I think an argument could be made that not only is it the right thing morally to do because we aren't I'm not going to abandon my children at 18. You've heard that from all the callers. But I think it's actually an economically wise thing for government to do.

CONAN: Here's an email from it might be Meliss(ph) or M. Ellis(ph), I'm not so sure: I aged out in 1968. I'm a 60-year-old woman. I was completely on my own, attended college on my own with only loans, work. I made it, but at age 26, when I moved from Northern California, my home state, to Pocatello, Idaho, to take my first job as a teacher, I was basically rejected by the foster parents who I believed were my family.

This devastated me, and for years, I dealt with depression. I became a teacher, later obtained a counseling license. I have a great family and marriage, two grown sons.

I really needed, however, resources like those being given today and therapy from an early age. Thanks for attention to this group of children who are the bottom of the bottom. It has taken me a lifetime to address all the pain I experienced. I take great pride in being able to contribute to the counseling field. And I don't think there are many like me have made it very far. At least I haven't met one on the counseling field.

I wonder, Jeremy, you're now basically in the counseling field.

Mr. LONG: Not so much. I guess - I wouldn't necessarily (unintelligible) but I definitely do a lot of peer to peer work and definitely give them insight to the resources that are available that were also given to me at a young age that have been really the drive behind my success.

CONAN: What do you plan to do when you graduate?

Mr. LONG: I plan to actually come here to D.C. because I got an internship with the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, which is big here in D.C. on promoting policy within the capital.

CONAN: So - but working on foster issues?

Mr. LONG: Yes.

CONAN: So you're going to, in a sense, stay connected with the issues you've been connected with your whole life...

Mr. LONG: Yes.

CONAN: ...or your whole adult life anyway. And it's interesting, the number of people who called who said they were in foster care and are now counselors or social workers or something like that.

Mr. COURTNEY: Yeah. I think a lot of young people end up having social workers and counselor people who helped them and then they want to help. They want to give back.

CONAN: Or do what their surrogate father or mother did.

Mr. COURTNEY: Exactly. That's their role model, positive role model. The other thing I want to say is that the - a lot of the changes in policy in the last 10, 15 years are a function of people like Jeremy and the folks that have been calling in actually getting involved in policymaking. I think the best policy comes from listening to the voices of these young people and young adults, and they've been enormously effective at affecting federal policy and state policy.

CONAN: Let's talk with Kevin, Kevin calling us from Davison, Michigan.

KEVIN (Caller): Hi, Neal. Thanks for taking my call. I graduated, if you will, out of foster care at the age of 18 and I got a rough go. A lot of things that I didn't learn in the wonderful foster family that brought me in was, you know, how many wolves were waiting for me outside that door.

CONAN: Wolves like what?

KEVIN: Well, my folks were killed when I was 16.

CONAN: Oh, I'm sorry.

KEVIN: And, unfortunately, I inherited some money. It was enough to get me started, but not enough to get me through college or anything. And so I started my own business, thinking that's what I needed to do. And there were a lot wolves that I knew but didn't know that would do what they did. I did some mechanical work on a property. The property owner couldn't pay me so he sold the property and the people he sold the property to refused to pay me because I didn't put a mechanic's lien on it. So you know, things like that you learn real quick who you can and who you can't trust out there.

CONAN: It sounds like people took advantage of you.

KEVIN: Absolutely. And, you know, I've learned - I'm now 44 and I had a wonderful foster family that were gracious enough to take me in - they didn't have to. And it was a rough road, but, you know, through perseverance and learning who you can and can't trust, you know, it helped me out.

CONAN: I wonder, do you have any connection with the foster system today?

KEVIN: I do not, Neal. I was listening to the radio program and kind of feeling guilty about it. I've thought about it. I have raised a son. He's now 21 years old and graduating from the University of Michigan next year. And very proud. And I have the empty nest syndrome bad. So maybe that's something I really need to look into.

CONAN: Well, good luck with that, Kevin, and thanks for the advice.

KEVIN: Thanks, Neal.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Were talking about kids who age out of foster care. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And let me reintroduce our guest, Jeremy Long, who is one of those kids, now about to graduate from Northern - the University of Northern Colorado and about to join us here in Washington, D.C. as a budding policymaker. And also with us, Mark Courtney, research and development director at Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington School of Social Work.

And let's see if we got another caller on the line. Let's go to Mark(ph) and Mark's with us from Minneapolis.

MARK (Caller): Hello.

CONAN: Hi, Mark.

MARK: Hi, hi. I'm calling - I'm not a kid who aged out of foster care but I'm the parent of a kid who aged out of foster care. My son spent 11 years in the system and we actually met him after he'd aged out, and actually formally adopted him when he was in his early 20's, although we had been parenting for a period before that.

CONAN: What's the point of adopting someone in their early 20's?

MARK: Well, I actually now worked with an agency that specializes with teenagers. We just - all we do is work with teens in the adoption system. We represent families in Minneapolis. And the point of it is that everybody does better if they have stable adults who are taking an interest in their lives and moving them forward. And in the case of our son, because of just the amount of disruptions he had experienced - I think he had 27 placements in 11 years.

CONAN: Wow.

MARK: Oh, yeah. Fairly extraordinary. It really was helpful. It's been really helpful to have a family, to have parents who are helping you through school. He's in college now, really doing incredibly well and just thriving, living at home. And you know, I'm not sure that just because you're 20 or 18 that you're ready to not have a family. They still need a family.

CONAN: That's psychological buffer, knowing there's a place to go if you can't go anywhere else.

MARK: That's exactly right. That's exactly right. And I think that when we talk about fixing the system, we so often just focus on, well, what are we going to do about kids who age out, and we forget that the first step should be: can we find families who can be there for these kids who are willing to step up, and whether they're 12 or five or 17, can we really take on that role of parenting?

CONAN: Mark, thank you very much.

MARK: Thank you.

CONAN: It's an interesting situation. And Mark Courtney, that's good advice. But in the little time we have left, if there were a couple of changes that you think would make a difference, what would they be?

Mr. COURTNEY: Well, I think extending care. I mean, I do think that states should take up that option because it gives them a lot of resources to do it. And then, pay more attention to the fact that a one-size-fits-all solution isn't going to work. You got people like Jeremy who've gotten the right kind of help while they were in care, got the mental health services they need and can go to college to succeed. And then you've got a lot of young people who have suffered enormous trauma for a long period of time who are going to need help for a long period of time, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment. They're going to need the kind of adults that Mark was talking about.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Mr. COURTNEY: And we've got a lot of parents. Half of the young people I'm studying, young women, were parents by the age of 21. So if a state like Illinois is going to

continue to help them, its going to be helping them with their parenting. So I think just being a lot more thoughtful about the fact that one size doesnt fit all.

We do have a lot of success stories early on, and then we have some young people who are going to need a lot of help. And I think we need to find the adults to stick with them, and then we have to have the kinds of support, whether its housing, health insurance, educational support, that, you know, that we provide, that I'm going to provide my kids and the parents do these days.

CONAN: Thank you very much for your time today. We appreciate it. Mark Courtney at the University of School - Washington School of Social Work and the lead researcher on a new report from the University of Washington School of Social Work in Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. And Jeremy Long, continued good luck to you.

Mr. LONG: Thank you.

CONAN: Jeremy Long is from Denver, where he works on the Bridging the Gap youth leadership board, and is about to graduate college.

Chicago Public Radio®

Study: Illinois Foster Kids Fare Slightly Better as Adults

<http://www.wbez.org/Content.aspx?audioID=41195>

Illinois' foster children are more likely to succeed than their peers in other Midwestern states. That's according to a joint study released Wednesday by the University of Chicago and the University of Washington.

Researchers interviewed foster children from Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin years after they'd left state care.

The findings are pretty bleak: Foster kids are much more likely to drop out of school, be homeless, get evicted and face financial problems than children from intact families.

But the study shows Illinois foster children fared better in adulthood than other Midwestern foster kids because the state lets them stay in the system until they're 21, instead of kicking them out at 18.

Mark Courtney headed up the study.

COURTNEY: Parents do not routinely kick their kids out at 18 and say, "Good luck. We've taken care of you 'till now, and you're on your own."

But that really is the policy in most states in the country right now, and Illinois is a very notable exception.

Courtney says Illinois foster kids have a lower risk of pregnancy as young adults. And they're also more likely to have some college experience, which means they earn more money, as well.

There are 1,553 young adults in state care in Illinois, according to a spokesman for the state Department of Children and Family Services. He says they're eligible for monthly stipends, transitional housing and even free tuition for community colleges.

TV



CBS News

Katie Couric's Notebook: After Foster Care

For most kids, turning 18 is a real milestone.

Suddenly, they are able to vote, join the military, even get married.

But for teens in the foster care system, turning 18 is a lot more complicated because that's when most "age out" of foster care...and are left to fend for themselves.

Many cannot manage, according to a new study of roughly 600 former foster kids in the Midwest. By their mid-20s, only half were employed and a paltry 6 percent had completed college. More than a third had been homeless or forced to move from place to place.

The study advocates a common sense solution: letting kids stay in foster care until the age of 21. States can get federal matching funds to do it, but few have chosen to pony up the cash.

That seems short-sighted. Nearly 30,000 kids leave foster care every year. If they don't succeed, taxpayers will pay a much higher price -- and so will the kids themselves. Turning 18 should be a day to celebrate... not a deadline to dread.

That's a page from my notebook.

I'm Katie Couric, CBS News.

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ONLINE

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Crime, unemployment, homelessness dog ex-foster care youths

Amanda Paulson

<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2010/0407/Crime-unemployment-homelessness-dog-ex-foster-care-youths>

Chicago

The vast majority of young people who age out of the foster-care system struggle to find housing and jobs and to complete their education, according to a new study released Wednesday, which tracked hundreds of foster-care youths from age 17 and 18 through age 23 or 24.

Among some of the more sobering findings:

- Only 6 percent of those surveyed had finished a two- or four-year college degree by age 24, and nearly one-quarter did not have a high school diploma or GED.
- Nearly 60 percent of the young men had been convicted of a crime.
- Only 48 percent were working, compared with 72 percent of their peers who hadn't been in foster care. For those working, the median income annual was just \$8,000.
- Nearly 40 percent had been homeless or had "couch-surfed" since leaving foster care, and three-quarters of the young women had received public assistance in the last year.

"We took these young people away from their families because we said we as a society can do a better job parenting them," says Mark Courtney, a professor at the University of Washington's School of Social Work and an author of the study. "If you look at the average outcomes, I don't think any parent would be happy with those outcomes."

Young parents, in particular, are struggling

In this study, which tracked foster kids from Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin over six years, Professor Courtney paid a lot of attention to various subgroups.

"Some of the groups are doing OK, just having to make transitions earlier than they might have liked," he says.

But he points to other groups – such as young parents – that are struggling. "They're raising kids and doing it in really difficult circumstances," Courtney says. Then there's

the one-fifth of the population that he calls “troubled and troubling” – those who have had run-ins with the law, have serious mental-health and substance-abuse problems, and will likely need significant support to turn their lives around.

Foster-care youths have always been among the most vulnerable and at-risk populations, and most have few supports once they age out of the system – which occurs in most states at age 18, though a handful, including Illinois, allow some young people to remain in the foster-care system until 21 if they meet certain conditions.

Efforts to provide more support

Some 30,000 youths age out of America's foster-care system each year, and in recent years, more attention has been given to their needs and to efforts to provide support. The 1999 Chafee Act doubled federal funding to support their transition to adulthood and expanded the range of services for which the funds could be used. And the Fostering Connections to Success Act, passed in 2008, offers incentives for states to extend foster care through age 21 – though that may be a tough sell to states facing dire fiscal crises.

This study found differences among youths who were allowed to stay in the system until 21 and those who had to leave at 18, though the differences were smaller than they expected and in some cases disappeared by the time the youths turned 24.

“To me, this says they need families that continue to provide that ongoing emotional connection,” says Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which works with youths aging out of the foster-care system. “We don’t cut our kids off at 21 any more than we cut them off at 18.... It underscores the need for us to help these kids connect with their families before they leave foster care.”

That would require a substantial shift, Mr. Stangler acknowledges, since the state took the kids away from those families. But in many cases, it can make a real difference, he says.

Courtney also hopes this study helps officials realize the challenges faced by many in foster care. For instance, he notes that about 20 percent of young women in foster care have a child by age 17, and half do by age 21. Yet the Fostering Connections to Success Act makes almost no mention of parenting, and requires people to be working or in school to benefit, but doesn’t offer child-care support. “We need to be targeting this population,” he says.

Spend more now, less later?

While such support can be expensive, Courtney and others note that it can be even more expensive to not pay for it, if youths end up on welfare or in the criminal justice system.

“It’s a population in need, and you’d be hard-pressed to find a population with worse outcomes, but from a policy perspective, these are big-bang-for-the-buck kids,” says Stangler.

Tarkiyah Melton, a former foster youth in Atlanta who did manage to make it – she now holds a steady job, got a college degree, regained custody of the daughter she had when she was 18, and recently purchased her first house with the help of a savings program that the Jim Casey Initiative runs – says leaving foster care was tough. She was homeless at times and had to relinquish custody of her daughter to get financial support in school.

“It was a huge shift,” Ms. Melton says, noting that most of her peers in the foster system didn’t do so well. “But I’m a forward-thinking person.”



According to Study Most Foster Care Adults are Performing Poorly

Prakash Sharma

<http://topnews.us/content/215717-according-study-most-foster-care-adults-are-performing-poorly>

According to a study, only half the youth who had turned 18 and “aged out” of foster care were working by their mid-20s. While six in 10 men had been imprisoned for a crime, three in four women, most of them with children of their own, were getting some form of public support. And only six in 100 had finished even a community college degree.

The miserable outlook for youth who are forced into an unstable adulthood by the foster care organization, now accounts to around 30,000 yearly.

Researchers reviewed the results for 602 youths in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin, and compared them with their pals who had not been in foster care. Most adolescents had entered the foster care organization in their early teens and were then asked to leave it at 18 or, in the case of Illinois, 21.

Mark Courtney, a Sociologist at the University of Washington who led the study with associates, said that they took the children away from their parents on the supposition that they as a society would do a far better job of nurturing them.

Over the last decade, the Federal Government and several states have started to aid former foster care youths with education funds, provisional housing subsidies and, extra years of state custody and support, in some places.

Gary Stangler, Director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a private foundation, said that once they leave foster care, these problematic youths often do not have trustworthy adults to counsel them or offer emotional support.