



For Immediate Release
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Major Study Shows Young People Who Age Out of Foster Care Continue to Face Joblessness, Homelessness and Low Educational Attainment into Their Twenties

Washington, D.C. – Young people who age out of foster care continue to face major challenges in their early twenties, often unable to complete their educations, find housing and jobs, or get medical care, according to a study released today by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington.

By age 24, only 6 percent of young people who left foster care had finished two- or four-year college degrees. Fewer than half were working. Nearly 40 percent had been homeless or “couch-surfed” since leaving foster care. Three quarters of the young women were receiving public assistance. And nearly 60 percent of the young men had been convicted of a crime at some point in their young lives.

The study was released today at a national child welfare symposium in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. The research is the largest, most comprehensive study of young adults leaving foster care in two decades.

“We were dismayed to find that almost a fifth of young people need significant help, perhaps for many years, after leaving foster care,” said Mark Courtney, research and development director of Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington.

Nearly 30,000 young people nationwide age out of foster care annually. Federal and state policies govern the age at which they must leave the child welfare system. In all but a few states, young people must leave foster care at age 18, though a growing number of states provide some services until age 21.

“The alarming bottom line is young people leave foster care without families and unprepared to be on their own and continue to face major problems into their early twenties,” said Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities

Initiative, a national foundation that helps youth leaving foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. “A decade after Congress passed the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, these young people simply are not being connected to supportive families and thus do not have the supports that we provide to our own children. These grim findings underscore the pressing need for federal and state policies that recognize what it will take to change these outcomes.”

In 2002 and 2003, researchers interviewed 732 youth in foster care ages 17 and 18 from Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The young people were interviewed again at 19 and again at 21. In 2008 and 2009, researchers interviewed 602 of the original youth, most of whom who were about 24 years old and had been out of foster care for an average of four years. The sequential interviews allowed researchers to determine how the young people fared over time as well as to contrast the problems of youth who had the option of remaining in foster care until age 21 with those who did not. Illinois allows youth to stay in foster care until 21.

Some young people had “beaten the odds,” graduating from college or pursuing degrees, researchers found. Some have steady jobs with decent pay and benefits. Some have stable housing and are forming families that they are able to support. Some have steered clear of the criminal justice system. But too many of the young people continue to struggle. In looking at the entire group of young people, the study found:

- About 37 percent had been homeless or had couch surfed – with roughly a third living that way for at least a month.
- Nearly a quarter did not have a high school diploma or a GED. While nearly a third had completed at least some college, only 6 percent had finished degrees.
- Compared with their peers, the young people who had left foster care were three times more likely not to have a high school diploma or GED, half as likely to have completed any college, and one-fifth as likely to have a college degree.
- Only 48 percent were working, compared with 72 percent of their peers who hadn’t been in foster care. Of those earning income from employment, the median income was \$8,000, compared to \$18,300 for their peers.
- Nearly 60 percent of the young men had ever been convicted of a crime, compared to 10 percent of their peers who had not been in foster care.
- Three quarters of the young women and a third of the young men had received government benefits to meet basic needs in the past year.
- Less than half had a bank account compared with 85 percent of their peers.
- Almost half reported at least one hardship in the past year, such as an eviction or utility shut-off. Nearly a third didn’t have enough to eat at some point in the past year.

The researchers identified distinct subgroups of youth whose differing needs raise questions about current federal and state policy. Most young people likely need the support provided in the newly enacted federal Fostering Connections to Success Act, which offers financial incentives to states to extend foster care to age 21. The problem is some young people may fall through cracks in the new law. A group of struggling young parents, most of whom rely on public assistance programs and many of whom suffer from economic hardships and a lack of social support, may not be able to cope with the new law's work and education requirements without extra assistance with their parenting responsibilities. Another group of young people suffer from chronic mental health and substance abuse problems and have a history of involvement with the criminal justice system, calling into question whether they will be allowed to remain in care past age 18 under the new law.

Researchers examined whether staying in foster care until age 21 boosted educational attainment, employment and the ability to find stable housing and found a mixed picture. They found that young people who stayed in care between ages 18 and 21 stayed in school and earned more income. Youth from Illinois were more likely to have completed at least one year of college by age 23 or 24 than their Iowa and Wisconsin counterparts but were no more likely to have completed a two- or four-year college degree. Researchers suggested that perhaps the Illinois youth made educational progress as long as they had foster care supports until age 21 and that continuing their education became much more difficult once those services disappeared. Extending foster care to age 21 reduced the likelihood of homelessness before age 21, but did not prevent homelessness after that. Researchers said policymakers should consider housing assistance beyond age 21, a costly option, they noted, but "something parents regularly do for their own children."

"Our study raises questions about newly passed federal legislation that makes it less costly for states to extend foster care until age 21," said Courtney of Partners for Our Children. "Will allowing youth to remain in foster care be enough to make a real change in the poor outcomes we see, or will these young people need support for a longer period? Will the requirements of the new law leave some of the most vulnerable former foster youth out in the cold? What is clear is that substantive policy changes need to be made to do justice to the complex needs of former foster youth."

Stangler noted that the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's work in 11 sites across the country offers a promising model to help these young people make it. "They need lifelong relationships with caring adults, supports to finish their educations and to find jobs, financial literacy training and saving accounts to build assets and to get several necessities, such as cars, to find work and housing," he said. "We offer these things to our own children, and we should do no less for youth leaving foster care."

"The supports for young people transitioning from foster care must start earlier and must be improved. We can't delay any longer," said Frank Farrow, director of the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, D.C. "We're losing too many young people. The federal government and state child welfare programs should adopt approaches that deliver results, such as the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. We need to make a

commitment as a nation to help these young people stay in families, in school and on track for good jobs.”

The study was conducted with the cooperation of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, and the Iowa Department of Human Services. It was funded by the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, The Stuart Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the W.T. Grant Foundation.

For the full study and related issue briefs, visit **www.chapinhall.org** or **www.partnersforourchildren.org**. To interview Mark Courtney, call Sarah Lee at 206-898-2025. To interview Opportunity Passport™ participants or Gary Stangler, call Carla Owens Braziel at 314-496-7364.

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*The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative brings together the people, systems, and resources necessary to assist youth leaving foster care make successful transitions to adulthood through: making grants, providing technical assistance, and advocating for improved policies and practices. For more information, visit **www.jimcaseyyouth.org***

*Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities. Our multidisciplinary research encompasses the needs of all children and adolescents, and devotes special attention to those experiencing significant problems, such as maltreatment, poverty, delinquency, and mental and physical illness. For more information, visit **www.chapinhall.org***

*Partners for Our Children brings together the best minds from the academic and child-welfare communities, policy makers and the private sector for one purpose: to improve the lives of children in foster care. Formed in 2007, it is a collaborative effort of the University of Washington School of Social Work, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services and private funders. For more information, visit **www.partnersforourchildren.org***

*The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) is a public policy, research and technical assistance organization. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., CSSP works with state and federal policymakers and with communities across the country. We rely on data, extensive community experience and a focus on results to promote smart policies that improve the lives of children and their families and achieve equity for those too often left behind. For more information, visit **www.cssp.org***