

Young Adult Outcomes of Youth Exiting Dependent or Delinquent Care in Los Angeles County

BACKGROUND

Increasing attention is being given to helping vulnerable youth transition successfully into adulthood and independence. Previous research has shown higher risks of criminal justice involvement, unemployment, teen pregnancy, behavioral health disorders, homelessness, and lower educational attainment for youth in child welfare systems. This study investigates the young adult outcomes of youth who age out of, or otherwise exit, Los Angeles County's foster care system and/or juvenile probation system. Investigators analyzed a comprehensive data set of youth who exited foster care or probation in Los Angeles County in 2002 or 2004 linked to records of service utilization that stretched from 2005 to 2009 across seven Los Angeles County Departments and two California state agencies. This unique study looks at the relationship and dynamics between a number of domains including education, employment, health, mental health, criminal justice, and public welfare systems; and it is the first study to report on adult outcomes among the sub-group of "crossover" youth who are involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Young adults who were previously in the child welfare or juvenile justice system, or both (crossover youth), tend to be economically insecure.
 - Sixty-eight percent of youth who exited foster care and 82 percent of crossover youth received public welfare benefits (General Relief, CalWorks, food stamps or MediCal) during the first four years of adulthood. These rates decline in years five to eight but are still substantial (41 percent for foster youth, 54 percent for crossover youth).
 - Less than half of former foster youth and crossover youth had any earnings in early adulthood. The average cumulative earnings over the first four years after exit was less than \$30,000 for former foster youth and less than \$14,000 for crossover youth.
 - One-third of former foster youth and one-half of crossover youth experienced a period of extreme poverty during their young adult years (measured by receiving both CalWorks and General Relief).
2. "Crossover" youth (those who were in both the child welfare and probation systems) experience unique challenges.
 - Crossover youth were more likely than foster youth with no probation involvement to have multiple out-of-home placements and to exit care from a group home (rather than with relatives or a foster family).
 - In comparison to foster youth with no involvement in probation, crossover youth were more than twice as likely to be heavy users of public systems in adulthood, three times as likely to experience a jail stay, one and a half times more likely to receive General Relief, and 50 percent less likely to be consistently employed.
 - Nearly one-quarter of crossover youth received treatment for a serious mental illness during the first four years of adulthood, more than double the rates of those who were in just foster care or probation.
 - The average per-person cost of public service utilization for crossover youth for years one to four (\$35,171) was more than double that of youth in just the foster youth (\$12,532) or probation (\$15,985) systems.

3. Criminal justice involvement as young adults is quite high among these youth and represents significant costs.
 - Nearly two-thirds of crossover youth had a jail stay in early adulthood, compared to half of those who were just on juvenile probation and a quarter of former foster youth.
 - The average cumulative cost of jail stays over four years in young adulthood ranged from \$18,430 (child welfare youth) to \$33,946 (crossover youth).
 - Criminal justice costs accounted for the largest share of average public costs in adulthood, 70 percent for those who were just on probation, 60 percent for crossover youth, and 40 percent for former foster youth.
4. A relatively small number of these youth account for significant public costs as young adults.
 - In each study group, the 25 percent of those who made the most extensive and expensive use of public services accounted for about 75 percent of the overall cost of services.
5. Higher educational attainment and consistent employment are key predictors of positive young adult outcomes.
 - Just under half of former foster youth and crossover youth enrolled in community college in young adulthood; but just about two percent completed an Associate's Degree.
 - Youth who had a pattern of consistent earnings had public service costs 70 percent lower than those who did not have consistent earnings.
 - There was a strong association between level of educational attainment and higher likelihood of employment and earnings, as well as lower levels of public service utilization and costs, jail stays, and public cash assistance.

IMPLICATIONS

- The extension of foster youth benefits through AB12 (or the extension of emancipation in other states) offers an opportunity to provide needed transition services to improve young adult outcomes of vulnerable youth.
- Special attention should be placed on crossover youth and other heavy service users, who experience the most negative personal outcomes and highest levels of public service costs.
- Education and employment services provide key opportunities for intervention to ensure more positive outcomes for vulnerable youth.
- Further research is needed to better understand the role of several factors, including the role of transitional housing programs and the time and circumstances of exits from the child welfare system.

RESEARCH TEAM Dennis Culhane, Professor of Social Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania
Stephen Metraux, Associate Professor of Health Policy and Public Health, University of the Sciences in Philadelphia
Thomas Byrne, Researcher in Social Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania
Manuel Moreno, Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office
Halil Toros, Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office

DATA & METHODS The data set analyzed for this report came from administrative records maintained by the California Department of Social Services (DSS), the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and the Los Angeles County Department of Probation. Records of persons previously in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems as youth were identified and matched with records from an array of adult systems.

Descriptive analyses examined outcomes occurring in the first four years following exit for those who exited from care in 2004 and outcomes for years five through eight following exit for those who exited in 2002. Multivariate modeling techniques were used to examine whether the differences between groups were attributable to differences in the characteristics, experiences, or other underlying factors associated with membership in each group.

FULL REPORT The Executive Summary and Full Report can be downloaded at:
<http://www.hiltonfoundation.org/youthexiting>.

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