

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

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TAKEAWAYS

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

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

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



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Young adults transitioning out of foster care face a well-

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

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

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Extended Foster Care Coverage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Implications

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

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

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¹Reilly, T. (2003). Transitions from care: Status and outcomes of youth who age out of foster care. *Child Welfare*, 82(6), 727–746.

²Reilly, T. & Schlinkert, D. (2022). Transition from foster care: A cross sectional comparison of youth outcomes twenty years apart. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00901-0>

³Fernandes-Alcantara, L. A. (2019, May 29). John H. Chafee Foster care program for successful transition to adulthood. *Congressional Research Services*, RL34499. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RL34499.pdf>

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⁵Pecora, P. J. (2012). Maximizing educational achievement of youth in foster care and alumni: Factors associated with success. *Educational Interventions, Practices, and Policies to Improve Educational Outcomes among Children and Youth in out-of-Home Care*, 34(6), 1121–1129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.01.044>

⁶Arnett, J. J. (2004). Emerging Adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>

Sources & Methods

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

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

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

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

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

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