



*A Summary of Sub-studies using data from The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth:  
Key Findings and Implications for Policy Reform*

*Introduction*

Most child welfare advocates are familiar with the Midwest Evaluation of the *Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*<sup>1</sup> (Midwest Study) and recognize it as a seminal piece of research that demonstrates poor outcomes for youth who have aged out of foster care. In fact, many advocates have used the results to promote key policy reforms, including greater access to higher education, a focus on pregnancy prevention for youth in foster care, and extension of foster care benefits beyond age 18, to name a few.

Many advocates may not be aware, however, of the ways in which data from the Midwest Study continue to be mined by researchers to inform policy and practice. Below are high-level findings from some key pieces of research that have been conducted using the data from the Midwest Study.

This document was published to accompany the podcast interview conducted by SPARC with Dr. Mark Courtney, the principal investigator of the Midwest Study.

For copies of these articles please contact Richa Mathur with SPARC at [rricham@firstfocus.net](mailto:rricham@firstfocus.net). The great variations among states in identifying, recording, and responding to the use of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) as it increases risks to the safety and well-being of children

*Homelessness and the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood*

Authors: Amy Dworsky and Mark E. Courtney

Year Published: 2009

Journal: *Child Welfare* Vol. 88, No. 4

*Key Findings*

- Relationships with family are important for youth in foster care. Feeling close to at least one adult family member reduced the odds of becoming homeless by more than half.
- Runaway and delinquent behavior increase the likelihood of becoming homeless.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- Interventions aimed at creating or strengthening family ties, including ties to grandparents and sibling, should be developed where it is in the best interests of a young person. The ability of family ties to reduce the risk of homelessness should be evaluated.
- More should be done to encourage states to use their Chafee dollars, as well as money from other sources, to provide housing assistance to foster youth after they leave care.
- States should take advantage of federal legislation that makes youth aging out of foster care eligible for housing assistance under the Department of Housing and Urban Development's family unification program (FUP).

### *Homelessness During the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood*

Authors: Amy Dworsky, Laura Napolitano, and Mark Courtney

Year Published: 2013

Journal: *American Journal of Public Health* Supplement 2, Vol. 103, No. S2

### *Key Findings*

The following factors are associated with an increase in the relative risk of becoming homeless:

- Running away while in foster care
- Frequent placement changes
- Having symptoms of a mental health disorder
- A history of childhood physical abuse

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- Child welfare agencies should ensure that all youth have a concrete plan to address their housing needs after they age out, including where they plan to live, with whom, and how they plan to pay for it. Special attention should be given to the housing needs of youth at higher risk for homelessness, such as more hands-on housing search assistance or advocacy with transitional housing programs.
- Child welfare agencies should do more to help youth build financial assets while they are still in foster care, which would help to increase the housing options available to youths and provide them with a safety net.
- States that have not already done so should consider enacting legislation to allow youth to remain in care until 21.

*Homelessness and health care access after emancipation: Results from the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*

Authors: Margot B. Kushel, Irene H. Yen, Lauren Gee, Mark E. Courtney

Year Published: 2007

Journal: *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* Vol. 161, No. 10

*Key Findings*

- Recently emancipated foster youth are at high risk for poor housing and poor health care access. Poor housing and poor health care access are associated with one another: one may lead or contribute to the other, and vice versa.

*Policy & Practice Implications*

- Strategies to improve health outcomes among emancipated youth should address both their lack of health insurance and their risk of housing instability and homelessness.

*The risk of teenage pregnancy among transitioning foster youth: Implications for extending care beyond age 18*

Authors: Amy Dworsky, Mark E. Courtney

Year published: 2010

Journal: *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 32

*Key Findings*

- Foster youth are more likely to experience teenage pregnancy than their peers in the general population, but staying in care seems to mitigate their risk of becoming pregnant even after the effects of other factors are taken into account.

*Policy & Practice Implications*

- Child welfare agencies should make a more concerted effort to help youth in foster care avoid becoming pregnant. Allowing young people to remain in foster care beyond age 18 may be one way to reduce teenage pregnancy among this population.

### *Receipt of help acquiring life skills and predictors of help receipt among current and former foster youth*

Authors: Mark E. Courtney, JoAnn Lee, Alfred Perez

Year Published: 2011

Journal: *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 33

#### *Key Findings*

- Youth transitioning from foster care do not receive many forms of help that are called for in federal legislation providing for funding of independent living services. Also, young people report that they would have liked more help than they received.
- Staying in foster care longer gives youth more access to the services they need.
- The indicators of the need for services appear to be generally unrelated to receipt of help. Efforts to connect services to the youth who need them may not be well-targeted.

#### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- More efforts should be made to provide current and former foster youth between 18 and 21 with the assistance called for in federal law.
- Extending foster care to 21 may be one way to ensure increased access to needed services.
- More efforts should also be made to involve foster parents and kinship caregivers more actively in providing youth with life skills training.

### *Extended Foster Care Support During the Transition to Adulthood: Effect on the Risk of Arrest*

Authors: J.S. Lee, M.E. Courtney, & E. Tajima.

Year Published: 2014

Journal: *Children & Youth Services Review* Vol. 42

#### *Key Findings*

- Extended care is associated with a lower risk of arrest in the first year after emancipation from foster care, but appears to have a declining effect over time.
- For women, in addition to being out of care in the first year, having a prior arrest record was associated with a high risk of arrest, while having a child residing in the home was associated with a lower risk of arrest.

- For men, there was no similar protective effect for having a resident child. However, having a prior arrest record and having alcohol or substance use symptoms were strongly associated with increased risk of arrest, while having mental health symptoms was associated with lower risk of arrest

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- The child welfare system can serve as an institution of social control during the transition to adulthood, and as such, may play an important role in facilitating the youths' transition to adulthood.

### *Formal Bonds During the Transition to Adulthood: Extended Foster Care Support and Criminal/Legal Involvement*

Authors: J.S. Lee, M.E. Courtney, & J.L. Hook

Year Published: 2014

Journal: *Journal of Public Child Welfare* Vol. 6

### *Key Findings*

- Attachment to other institutions of informal control, such the education system and employment, during the transition to adulthood may reduce the likelihood of future legal system and criminal involvement.
- Having at least one resident child was associated with lower odds of legal system involvement for both women and men.
- Placement instability is associated with higher legal system involvement and engagement in criminal behaviors for both women and men.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- Extending foster care beyond age 18 for former foster youth may reduce future criminal involvement, particularly for women.
- Providing the support that young people need to be active parents may benefit both the crime outcomes for these former foster youth, as well as outcomes for their children.
- The emphasis on education and employment during this transition period will also have an impact on reducing criminal outcomes.

### *Risk for Arrest: The Role of Social Bonds in Protecting Foster Youth Making the Transition to Adulthood*

Authors: G.R. Cusick, J. Havlicek, & M.E. Courtney

Year Published: 2012

Journal: *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* Vol. 82, 1

### *Key Findings*

- Social bonds to (that is, a commitment to and involvement with) educational pursuits and employment decrease the risk of arrest among youth who have aged out of foster care.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- These findings suggest the need to create and effectively implement programs that target the employment and educational needs of foster youth.

### *Health Insurance Coverage and Receipt of Family Planning Services Among Current and Former Foster Youth: Implications of the Health Reform Law*

Authors: Amy Dworsky, Kym Ahrens, Mark E. Courtney

Year Published: 2014

Journal: *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, Vol. 38.

### *Key Findings*

- Young women are more likely to have health insurance if they remain in foster care until their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Having health insurance is associated with an increase in the likelihood of receiving family planning services.
- Because having health insurance is associated with the receipt of family planning services, the recent increase in Medicaid eligibility for former foster youth provided by the Affordable Care Act may result in fewer unintended pregnancies among this high-risk population.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- These findings underscore the need to enroll as many former foster youth transitioning to adulthood as possible in Medicaid.

### *Trauma exposure and PTSD among older adolescents in foster care*

Authors: Amy M. Salazar, Thomas E. Keller, L. Kris Gowen & Mark E. Courtney

Year Published: 2012

Journal: *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*

### *Key Findings*

- Approximately 30% of respondents in this study reported experiencing their worst trauma at or after age 16. In most states, this means that youth are being released from care at age 18 while they are still attempting to process highly traumatic experiences.
- Access to health insurance and receipt of mental health counseling is dramatically reduced when youth leave the child welfare system.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- Child welfare policy and practice should account for the potential needs of these youth for trauma related services, specifically evidence-based and age-appropriate treatments for PTSD.

### *Prevalence and timing of diagnosable mental health, alcohol, and substance use problems among older adolescents in the child welfare system*

Authors: Thomas E. Keller, Amy M. Salazar, Mark E. Courtney

Year Published: 2010

Journal: *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 32

### *Key Findings*

- Youth about to leave foster care have an elevated risk to meet criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD and are at the upper ranges of general population estimates for rates of other serious mental health and substance use problems.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- Because major mental health and substance use disorders in adolescence can contribute to impairments in functioning during early adulthood, practitioners and policymakers have a significant interest in the mental health status of adolescents exiting the child welfare system.

### *Subpopulations of Older Foster Youths With Differential Risk of Diagnosis for Alcohol Abuse or Dependence*

Authors: Thomas E. Keller, Jennifer E. Blakeslee, Stephanie C. Lemon, and Mark E. Courtney

Year published: 2010

Journal: *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*

### *Key Findings*

- The study identifies distinct subpopulations of adolescents transitioning from child welfare with differential rates of alcohol-use disorder. These include youth exhibiting delinquency behavior and exposure to violence, those in independent living settings, and White children who do not have a close connection to a caregiver.
- Careful assessment incorporating multiple factors is necessary to identify alcohol and drug prevention and intervention opportunities and service needs for the population of youths aging out of foster care.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- Particular profiles may guide child welfare and treatment professionals in identifying the adolescents most likely to exhibit serious alcohol problems and suggesting how to tailor programs and services to the needs of different types of youths in the system.

### *Employment outcomes of former foster youth as young adults: The importance of human, personal and social capital*

Authors: Jennifer L. Hook, Mark E. Courtney

Year Published: 2011

Journal: *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 33

### *Key Findings*

- Youth who remain in care past age 18 attain higher educational credentials, which translate into better employment outcomes.
- Many young men who have aged out have been involved with the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems.
- Among young women, motherhood is a barrier to employment and attaining higher wages.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- The findings point to a clear need to understand and address the barriers to education and employment for this population.
- Child welfare agencies should collaborate more closely with criminal justice systems in developing coordinated practice models, and for enhanced interventions targeting behavior problems of adolescents in foster care, particularly young men, to prevent their involvement in the criminal justice system.

- Child welfare practitioners and administrators should devote more attention to the particular needs of pregnant and parenting women who are transitioning out of foster care.

[Approaching the Transition to Adulthood: Distinctive Profiles of Adolescents Aging Out of the Child Welfare System](#)

Authors: Thomas E. Keller, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Mark E. Courtney

Year Published: 2007

Journal: *Social Service Review*

*Key Findings*

- The study identifies four (4) subpopulations of youth aging out, each of which exhibit distinct profiles. This suggests the possibility of tailoring ongoing support to the particular needs and circumstances of youth transitioning out of care.
  - 1: “Distressed and Disconnected”: Many of these young people are likely to have a continuing need for extensive support and supervision, but they may be resistant to such help. The child welfare system must contend with a large number of youth whose behavior and antipathy toward the system pose difficulties. These youth will require a range of relatively intensive supports for the foreseeable future.
  - 2: “Competent and Connected”: A larger number of youth who present a more hopeful profile. These youth will need to develop skills for independent living and also will need continuing support in the transition to adulthood, although support of a very different nature than that needed by youth in first group.
  - 3: “Struggling but Staying”: Young people in this group appear more open to using the child welfare system in the future. If they are able to stay connected with the child welfare system and their foster care providers during the transition to adulthood, they may be better able than the distressed and disconnected group to take advantage of life skills training and transitional living services.
  - 4: “Hindered and Homebound”: Because these youth have close family ties and parenting responsibilities, the child welfare system may need to consider the nature of educational and employment expectations for these youth, as well as the degree of emphasis placed on moving them toward greater self-sufficiency.

*Policy & Practice Implications*

- The findings suggest the possibility of tailoring ongoing support to the particular needs and circumstances of distinctive subpopulations of youth who are transitioning out of care.

## *Distinct subgroups of former foster youth during young adulthood: Implications for policy and practice*

Authors: Mark E. Courtney, Jennifer L. Hook, & JoAnn S. Lee

Year Published: 2012

Journal: *Child Care in Practice* Vol. 18, No. 4

### *Key Findings*

- The study identifies four distinct profiles of young people making the transition to adulthood from foster care. The characteristics of these subgroups indicate the need for more targeted policy and practice directed towards adolescents and young adults involved with the child welfare system.

### *Policy & Practice Implications*

- The child welfare system should collaborate with and rely on other public institutions in carrying out its mission supporting youth people making the transition to adulthood. These young people have significant needs in the areas of education, employment, parenting, health and behavior. While the child welfare system should be held accountable for attending to those needs, it should not try to reinvent the wheel by creating new services where other public institutions already have expertise and infrastructure.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* (better known as simply “The Midwest Study”) is a longitudinal study that has been following a sample of young people from Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois as they transition out of foster care into adulthood. It is a collaborative effort involving Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; the University of Wisconsin Survey Center; and the public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. The most well-known finding and application of the study is that extending foster care until age 21 may be associated with better outcomes for youth who age out of care.