



ASSESSING THE TRANSITION OF YOUTH IN AND OUT OF FOSTER CARE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of youth within the foster care system remain understudied, despite a growing awareness of the impact of childhood experiences on successful adult outcomes. But how are those experiences best assessed to develop actionable recommendations for social workers and child welfare advocates? How do children and youth understand their transition into and out of foster care? We seek to address these questions by utilizing qualitative data from the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). In semi-structured interviews with 120 19-year-olds, the SC NYTD team used thematic analysis to amplify the voices of youth in transition on the topics of housing stability, educational and financial assistance, and relationships with caregivers. From these experiences, the SC NYTD team developed specific recommendations for child welfare practice with youth in transition, focusing on the prevalence of homelessness among youth in transition and the reasons for leaving or remaining within care.

METHODOLOGY

- **Mixed-mode** (phone, internet, mail, and in-person) survey that includes federally mandated questions and state-specific questions (supplemental questions)
- Offered to all youth in foster care who reach their **17th birthday** during the federal fiscal year (October 1st – September 30th) in which the survey is conducted
- Youth who participate at 17 are surveyed again at **19** and **21**, regardless of their foster care status
- Every **three years**, a new baseline population of 17-year-olds is surveyed



THEMES

Entering the Foster Care System Is a Traumatic Experience for Many Youth

34% of youth identified entering the foster care system as one of the most difficult experiences they faced. Youth reported being disoriented and distressed when entering foster care, and often blamed themselves for being placed within the system.



“We got split up and we didn’t know what was going on, and they just start separating us in different cars. And they, my brother and sister, started crying and I was trying to hug them telling them it was going to be okay. But I couldn’t do anything.”

“It really didn’t dawn on me, like, why, until... my case worker, at the time, sat down and talked with me and she was just like, ‘This is what’s going on.’ And I’m really grateful ‘cause they really don’t do that for eight year olds. Understanding from my point of view as a child, what was happening. Kind of made it less y’all are just mean.”



Choosing Whether to Leave the Foster Care System Was One of the Most Meaningful Decisions Youth Faced

23% of youth considered whether or not to transition out of foster care at 18 to be one of the most meaningful decisions they had to make. Of those, 21% chose to stay in foster care and receive services available to transition-age youth, while 67% left foster care at 18.



“It was a big decision to either stay in or stay out, but I ended up staying in. Because it has allowed me to get more help with school and stuff, paying for school... and other stuff that I needed help with.”

Decisions About Their Educational, Financial, and Career Futures Were in the Forefront of Youth Minds

25% of youth surveyed indicated that their most meaningful decision involved planning for their future as independent adults. For most of the 19-year-olds, educational decisions were the most meaningful (n=19), with career (n=6) and financial (n=5) also being important.



“I didn’t want to go to high school, I wanted to drop out, and so I had to think about my future. So I decided to stay in school because... I want a life instead of having, you know, instead of living on the streets and stuff, I wanted to have something that... will help me in life and get through life. So I’m staying in school and finishing it up.”

Many Youth Experienced Housing Instability and Homelessness

15% of youth indicated that their most difficult experiences involved incarceration, inadequate care, or housing instability.

“When I was moved from one of the children’s home that I was at. I was there for six years, and they had made a decision that I should leave. They never really told me why so I thought that you know maybe it was because of me personally that... I did something wrong.”



Of the youth who responded to the quantitative questions:

- 1 in 4 youth reported moving 5 or more times in the past two years
- 48% reported having lived in 5 or more homes (foster homes and/or group homes) while in foster care
- 16% reported being homeless at any time in the past two years.
- Of the youth who reported being homeless at any time in the past two years, 12% were not aware of where to get housing assistance.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Support on Entry to Foster Care

Give youth a timely, thorough briefing upon entrance to foster care, along with counseling or mentoring services early in their foster care experience.

Emphasize and Provide Services for Transition-Aged Youth

Inform both youth and caseworkers of the resources available to transition-aged youth, as well as support caseworkers and independent living teams on providing those services in a consistent, timely manner.

Attend to Housing Needs for Transition-Aged Youth

Counsel youth on available housing assistance before leaving foster care, and identify additional supports within the community in cooperation with youth to help them find help in the case of losing their home or an unstable living situation.

Provide Additional Future Planning Support

Ensure that transition-aged foster youth are supported as they plan for the future, including with mentors, training, and educational or career support.