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Assessing the Impact of Extending Care beyond Age 18 on Homelessness: Emerging Findings from the Midwest Study

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One of the major challenges facing the approximately 29,500 young people who age out of foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009) is finding a safe and affordable place to live. Studies that have examined the circumstances of transitioning foster youth suggest that far too many of these young people experience periods in which they are either homeless or precariously housed (Barth, 1990; Cook, Fleishman, & Grimes, 1991; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Brandford & English, 2004; Reilly, 2001; Fowler, Toro, Tompsett, & Hobden, 2006).

Efforts have been made at the federal level to help address this problem. First, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 allows states to spend up to 30 percent of their Chafee Independent Living Program funds directly on housing for former foster

youth until their 21st birthday.¹ It also requires states to use at least some portion of their Chafee funds to provide follow-up services and supports to young people ages 18 to 20, who have aged out of foster care. Second, since 2000, young people aging out of foster care have been eligible for the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Family Unification Program (FUP). This program, which was originally developed for families whose children had been placed (or were at imminent risk of being placed) in foster care due to lack of adequate housing, requires Memoranda of Understanding between child welfare agencies and public housing authorities. Former foster youth who participate in FUP receive rental assistance for a maximum of 18 months as well as other services.² And third, in a small number of jurisdictions, foster youth have been given priority access to Housing Choice Vouchers (i.e., Section 8).

¹ For nearly a decade, states had been prohibited from using their Title IV-E Independent Living Program funds to pay for room and board (Allen, Bonner, & Greenan, 1988; Barth, 1990).

² This 18-month time limit does not apply to FUP families whose children had been placed in foster care or were at imminent risk of being placed.

Most recently, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 will, among other things, allow states to claim Title IV-E reimbursement for the costs of providing foster care to eligible youth until age 21, rather than age 18, beginning in federal fiscal year 2011. In addition to creating a financial incentive for states to extend foster care, this legislation also expands the definition of *child-caring institution* for youth age 18 and older to include supervised independent-living settings and requires states to help youth develop a personalized transition plan during the 90 days immediately prior to the time when they will “age out.” Housing is one of several needs that the plan must specifically address.

Allowing young people to remain in foster care for up to 3 additional years could reduce homelessness in at least two ways. First, 18- to 20-year-old foster youth who might otherwise have been homeless would continue to have housing provided by the state. Second, young people may be better prepared for the transition to adulthood, and hence less likely to become homeless, once they do age out.

It is too soon to know whether the Fostering Connections legislation will have either of these effects on homelessness. However, we do have data from a longitudinal study that can shed some light on what we might expect to observe if states do opt to extend foster care until age 21. The study is unique in that the sample includes foster youth from one of the few states in which young people already can and routinely do remain in foster care until their 21st birthday as well as foster youth from two states in which that is not an option.

We briefly describe the study and then address three major questions:

- How common is homelessness among young people making the transition from foster care to adulthood?

- How soon during the transition from foster care to adulthood do young people become homeless?
- Is there any evidence that allowing young people to remain in care until age 21 reduces homelessness?

We find that, more than a decade after the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was created, far too many foster youth are still becoming homeless during the transition to adulthood. Although allowing young people to remain in care until their 21st birthday does prevent them from becoming homeless prior to age 19 and, to a lesser extent, age 21, it does not appear to reduce their risk of experiencing homelessness by age 23 or 24. We discuss the implications of our findings for both policy and practice.

The Midwest Study

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (henceforth the Midwest Study) is a longitudinal study that has been following a sample of 732 young people from Iowa ($n = 63$), Wisconsin ($n = 195$), and Illinois ($n = 474$) as they age out of foster care and transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2005). Foster youth in these three states were eligible to participate in the study if they (1) had entered care before their 16th birthday; (2) were still in care at age 17; and (3) had been removed from home for reasons other than delinquency.³ Study participants were 17 or 18 years old at the time of their first interview. Eighty-two percent ($n = 603$) were re-interviewed at age 19, 81 percent ($n = 591$) were re-interviewed at age 21, and 82 percent ($n = 602$) were re-interviewed at age 23 or 24. We focus on outcomes measured during the fourth wave of data collection, when study participants were either 23 or 24 years old.

³ For additional information about the sample and its selection, see Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller (2007).

How common is homelessness among former foster youth?

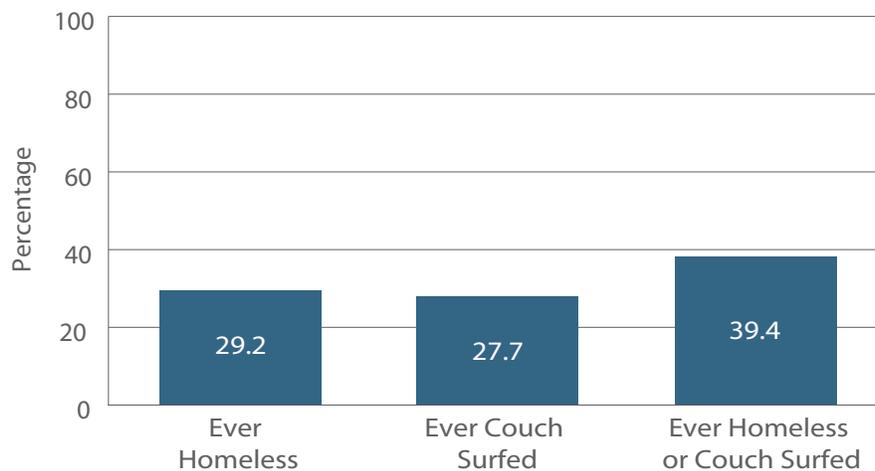
By age 23 or 24, almost 30 percent of the young people in our study reported that they had been homeless for at least one night since exiting foster care. Being homeless was defined as “sleeping in a place where people weren’t meant to sleep, or sleeping in a homeless shelter, or not having a regular residence in which to sleep.”⁴ Nearly as many reported that, since exiting foster care, they had ever couch-surfed, which we defined as “moving from one temporary housing arrangement provided by friends, family, or strangers to another.” Not surprisingly, perhaps, there was considerable overlap between these two groups.

Altogether, nearly 40 percent of the sample had ever been homeless or couch-surfed since exiting foster care (Figure 1).⁵

How soon after exiting foster care do young people become homeless?

Figure 2 shows the cumulative percentage of Midwest Study participants who became homeless during the first 30 months after exiting foster care.⁶ We focus on the first 30 months because nearly 98 percent of the young people who were interviewed during the fourth wave of data collection had exited foster care at least 30 months prior to their interview.

Figure 1
Homelessness Since Exiting Foster Care by Age 23 or 24

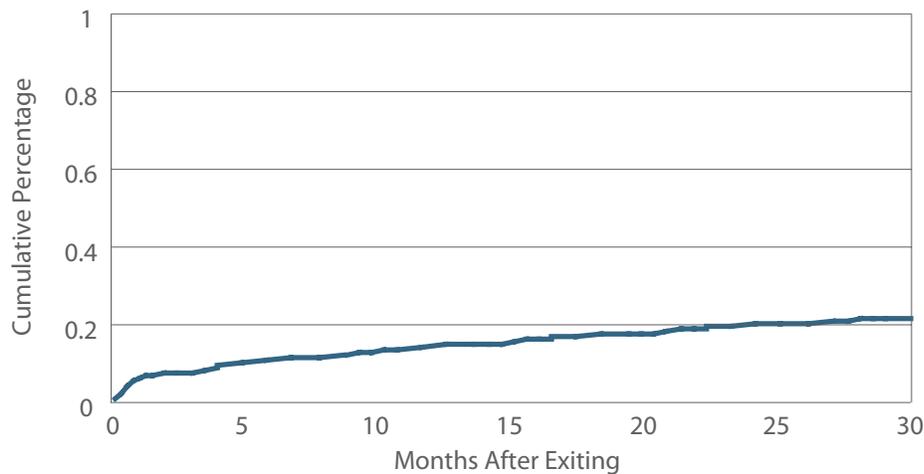


⁴ This was not the first time study participants had been asked about being homeless, and some of the young people who had reported ever being homeless since exiting foster care at an earlier wave of data collection did not report ever being homeless at age 23 or 24. Because we had no reason to believe that their earlier responses had been untruthful, we counted study participants as ever being homeless since exiting foster if they had ever responded affirmatively to the question about homelessness. Had we based our measure exclusively on their responses at age 23 or 24, 24.3 percent of the sample had been homeless and 36.5 percent had been literally homeless or couch-surfed since exiting foster care.

⁵ For more information about details of the frequency and duration of their homelessness, see Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap (2010).

⁶ When study participants were interviewed at wave 4, the number of months since their exit from foster care ranged from a low of 27.9 to a high of 82.8.

Figure 2
Cumulative Percentage Ever Homeless during the First 30 Months after Exiting Foster Care



Approximately 6 percent of the Midwest Study participants became homeless within the first month after exiting foster care, 14 percent became homeless within the first year, and 20 percent became homeless within the first 2 years. By the end of the first 30 months after exiting foster care, 22 percent of the sample had been homeless at least once. This means that nearly two-thirds (63%) of the young people who became homeless within the first 30 months post-exit did so during the first year.

Does allowing young people to remain in foster care until age 21 reduce homelessness?

In Iowa and Wisconsin, as in most states, young people age out of foster care when they are 18 years old. By contrast, Illinois is one of the few states in which young people can and often do remain under the state's care

and supervision until their 21st birthday. Although the average age at exit from foster care for all of the Midwest Study participants who were interviewed at wave 4 was 19.5 years old, study participants from Illinois were, on average, 20.2 years old when they exited while their counterparts from Iowa and Wisconsin were, on average, 18.2 years old.

We can use this difference between Illinois on the one hand, and Iowa and Wisconsin on the other to examine whether young people who were able to remain in foster care until age 21 were less likely to experience homelessness during the transition to adulthood than young people who could not. Figure 3 compares the cumulative percentage of young people from Illinois who ever reported being homeless to the cumulative percentage of young people from Iowa and Wisconsin who ever reported being homeless at ages 19, 21, and 23 or 24.⁷

⁷ Again, we counted study participants as ever being homeless since exiting foster if they had ever responded affirmatively to the question about homelessness. Had we based our measure exclusively on their responses at age 23 or 24, the difference at age 23 or 24 would have been even smaller, with 24.4 percent of the young people from Illinois reporting that they had ever been homeless since exiting foster care compared with 24.0 percent of their peers from Wisconsin and Iowa.

What is most notable about Figure 3 is how the difference between the two groups in the cumulative percentage ever homeless decreases over time. At age 19, Midwest Study participants from Iowa and Wisconsin were 2.7 times more likely to have been homeless than their peers from Illinois. This reflects the fact that nearly three-quarters of the young people in the Illinois sample were still in foster care compared with only two young people in the combined Iowa and Wisconsin sample.

By age 21, all of the Midwest Study participants had exited foster care. Although the young people from Iowa and Wisconsin were still 30 percent more likely to have been homeless than their Illinois counterparts, the difference between the two groups was no longer statistically significant. Almost all of that small difference had disappeared by age 23 or 24.

The fact that most of the difference between the two groups in the cumulative percentage ever homeless had disappeared by age 23 or 24 is particularly striking, given that the young people from Iowa and Wisconsin had exited foster care approximately 2 years earlier, on average, than their Illinois counterparts.

Figure 4 provides additional evidence that young people who are allowed to remain in foster care until age 21 are no less likely to become homeless during the first 30 months after exiting. During much of that 30-month period, the cumulative percentage of young people from Illinois who had been homeless was, if anything, slightly higher than the cumulative percentage of young people from Iowa and Wisconsin who had been homeless. Of course, that 30-month period began, on average, 2 years later for the young people from Illinois.

Although these between-group comparisons suggest that allowing young people to remain in foster care until age 21 does not reduce their likelihood of becoming homeless once they exit, they are based on the assumption that the two groups are the same, at least with respect to other factors that affect the risk of homelessness, are the same. It is possible, however, that the young people from Illinois were a more vulnerable group owing to their personal characteristics or placement histories.

To investigate this possibility, we estimated a number of multivariate models. Some of the models predicted

Figure 3
Cumulative Percentage Ever Literally Homeless by Age

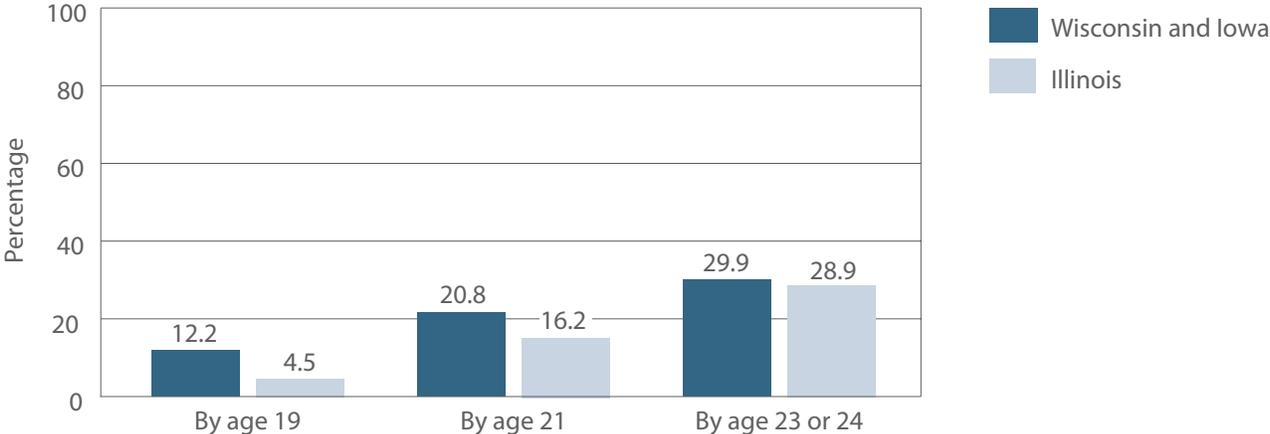
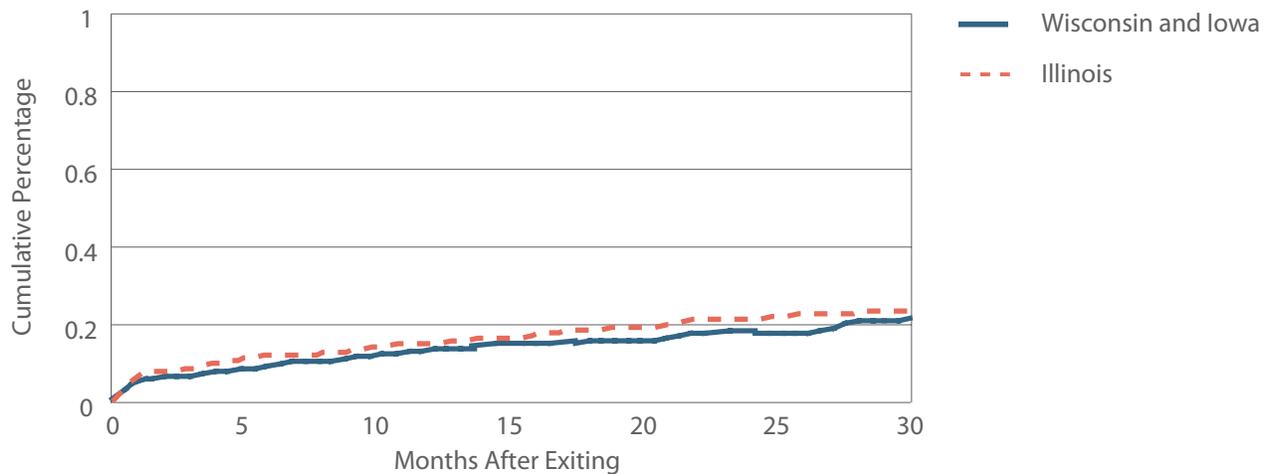


Figure 4
Cumulative Percentage Ever Homeless During the First 30 Months After Exiting Foster Care by State



whether the young people in our sample became homeless after exiting foster care. Others predicted not only whether they become homeless but also how soon after exiting foster care their first spell of homelessness began. In each case, we controlled for baseline characteristics of the study participants and their foster care placement histories.⁸ These models allowed us to examine whether giving young people the option to remain in foster care until their 21st birthday was associated with a reduction in the risk of becoming homeless, all other things being equal.

Consistent with the results shown in Figures 3 and 4, we found no evidence that allowing young people to remain in foster care until age 21 had a preventive effect, and this was true regardless of the model that we estimated.

Limitations

Although we were able to interview more than 80 percent of the 732 Midwest Study participants from whom we collected baseline data at each follow-up wave of data collection, at least some of the young people we were unable to interview may have been too difficult to locate because they were homeless. This would explain why so few of the young people we did interview were currently homeless. It also means that our data will underestimate the percentage of Midwest Study participants who were ever homeless after exiting foster care.

Another limitation of our analysis stems from the fact that our measures of homelessness are based on self-report at age 23 or 24 of events that may have

⁸ More specifically, we estimated both logistic regression and Cox proportional hazard models. All of the models included controls for gender, race/ethnicity, age at most recent entry into care, number of prior placements, running away from care three or more times, ever being placed in group care, ever being placed in kinship care, maltreatment history, having a mental health diagnosis, having a substance use diagnosis, ever being retained in school, ever receiving special education services, having a very close relationship with at least one adult family member, and engagement in delinquent behaviors. The logistic regression models also controlled for time since exit. These are very similar to the covariates used by Dworsky and Courtney (2009).

occurred at any time since these young people had exited foster care. What makes this problematic with respect to the between-state comparisons is that the young people from Illinois had, on average, exited care 2 years later than their peers from Iowa and Wisconsin. Consequently, it may have been easier for the young people from Illinois to recall any experiences they had since exiting foster care. This may explain why we did not observe between-state differences in self-reported homelessness at age 23 or 24.

A final limitation concerns the generalizability of our findings. We have no reason to believe that young people transitioning out of foster care in the Midwest are systematically more or less likely to experience homelessness than their peers elsewhere in the U.S. That said, our sample is limited to one geographic region.

What are the implications of these findings?

More than a decade after the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was created, far too many foster youth are still becoming homeless after they age out of care. By age 23 or 24, almost 30 percent of the Midwest Study participants had been literally homeless for at least one night. If we expand our definition of homelessness to include not only those young people who were homeless, but also those who couch surfed, nearly 40 percent of the Midwest Study participants did not have a safe and stable place to live at some point during their transition to adulthood.

These figures are disconcerting for a number of reasons. For one, the negative consequences associated with youth homelessness have been well documented (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). Young people who are homeless are at increased risk of experiencing violence and sexual victimization (Whitbeck, Hoyt, Yoder, Cauce, & Paradise, 2001). They frequently lack access to routine medical care and are at increased risk

of poor health outcomes (Ammerman et al., 2004; Feldmann & Middleman, 2003), including mental health and substance use problems (Halley & English, 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Homelessness can also be a barrier to both education and employment, thus making it even more difficult for young people who are already struggling to survive to become self-sufficient.

It is obvious from our data that homelessness is still a major problem among young people aging out of foster care. It is less clear, however, whether homelessness can be prevented by allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21. On the one hand, Midwest Study participants from Illinois, who could remain in foster care until their 21st birthday, were significantly less likely to have been homeless prior to their interview at age 19 than their peers from Iowa and Wisconsin, who did not have the option of remaining in foster care. Midwest Study participants from Illinois were also less likely than their peers from Iowa and Wisconsin to have been homeless prior to their interview at age 21, although this difference was not statistically significant.

On the other hand, we found no between-state difference in the percentage of Midwest Study participants who had been homeless prior to their interview at age 23 or 24. Taken together, these findings suggest that extending foster care to age 21 will reduce the percentage of foster youth who become homeless when they are 18 to 21 years old. However, beyond age 21, it may have little preventive effect.

What, then, are the policy and practice implications of our results? First, they reveal a critical need for better discharge planning with respect to housing. As already noted, state child welfare agencies are now required to help foster youth develop a personalized transition plan during the 90 days immediately before they age out of care. Whether this will reduce the percentage of young people who become homeless, particularly within the first year after exiting, remains to be seen.

Second, our results suggest that current efforts to address the housing needs of this population are not adequate to the task. That's not to say that no progress has been made. Some states are using Chafee dollars to provide transitional housing or other housing assistance to former foster youth, and in some jurisdictions state and local dollars are also being used (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2008). However, that funding is insufficient given the scope of the problem. Although states could conceivably use as much as 30 percent of their Chafee dollars for this purpose, this would probably mean diverting those limited funds from other independent living services and supports. Moreover, given the fiscal crisis that so many states and localities are facing, whatever state and local funds are being used to provide transitional housing or other housing assistance to former foster youth are at risk of being cut.

One solution would be for Congress to amend the Foster Care Independence Act to create a housing voucher program in the same way that it created the Education and Training Voucher program by amendment in 2001. Another would be to increase the number of former foster youth who benefit from the Family Unification Program (FUP).⁹ FUP is a particularly attractive option because young people who participate in the program receive not only housing vouchers but also services. The drawback is the 18-month time limit. For some young people aging out of foster care, 18 months of rental assistance is simply not enough. Thus, in addition to increasing the number of former foster youth who benefit from FUP, it would be important to eliminate the 18-month time limit.

Less clear, perhaps, are the policy and practice implications related to extending foster care until age 21. As already noted, many states are currently in the process of deciding whether to take advantage of the opportunity for federal reimbursement presented by the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and allow young people to remain in foster

care until their 21st birthday. If foster youth who are allowed to remain in care until age 21 are as likely to become homeless after they age out as foster youth for whom that is not an option, as our data would suggest, then perhaps states would be doing nothing more than postponing homelessness by extending foster care.

Alternatively, if extending foster care to age 21 does not prevent foster youth from becoming homeless after they age out, then perhaps we should provide these young people with supports, including housing assistance, beyond age 21. Although this option could be costly, it is worth considering if for no other reason than it is something that parents regularly do for their own children. Many young adults are either living with their parents (Fields, 2003) or relying on their parents for financial support, which may include help with their housing costs (Schoeni & Ross, 2004). We should do no less for young people who are on their own making the transition out of foster care.

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⁹ After several years with no FUP funding, the HUD budget for FY2009 included \$20 million for FUP.

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