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Does Extending Foster Care beyond Age 18 Promote Postsecondary Educational Attainment?

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What Is the Educational Status of Former Foster Youth?

Foster youth approaching the transition to adulthood have postsecondary educational aspirations similar to those of young people in the general population. Not only do a majority of foster youth want to attend college, but most of those who want to attend also expect to graduate (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). Unfortunately, for far too many foster youth with these aspirations, a college education remains an unfulfilled dream.

Estimated rates of college graduation among former foster youth range between 1 and 11 percent (Emerson, 2006; Pecora et al., 2003; Wolanin, 2005). However, those estimates are problematic for a variety of reasons. Most have been based on data collected from former foster youth who (1) were not selected to comprise a representative sample, (2) were not necessarily old enough to have completed their education, or (3) were too old to have benefited from

state or federal programs specifically designed to help this population pursue postsecondary education. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that young people aging out of foster care lag far behind their peers in the general population when it comes to attending college (Brandford & English, 2004; Wolanin, 2005) and graduating from college if they do attend (Wolanin, 2005; Davis, 2006).

Raising the level of educational attainment of young people aging out of foster care was a goal of both the Title IV-E Independent Living Program, established in 1986, and its successor, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, created in 1999. But it was not until Congress enacted the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 that federal funding expressly dedicated to increasing opportunities for foster youth to pursue postsecondary education was authorized. The Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program provides current and former foster youth with up to \$5,000 of assistance each year to cover tuition and fees, books and supplies, room and board, transportation or other qualified

education-related costs.¹ Foster youth making satisfactory progress toward the completion of their program can continue to receive an ETV until they are 23 years old if they first received it by age 21.

Foster youth may also be eligible for financial assistance from state-specific programs. Many states have tuition-waiver programs that allow foster youth to attend public institutions at no charge or at a significantly reduced rate. Others target foster youth for scholarships or grants (Eilertson, 2002; Spigel, 2004). Eligibility requirements and the amount of assistance available vary widely across states.

Although the impact of the ETV and state-specific programs on postsecondary educational attainment have yet to be assessed, previous analyses of data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (the Midwest Study) suggested that young people may be more likely to pursue their postsecondary educational goals if they are allowed to remain in foster care until age 21 rather than 18, as has traditionally been the case (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007). This issue brief reviews the data that were initially reported and presents more-recent data from the same longitudinal study regarding the relationship between postsecondary educational attainment and extending foster care until age 21. It is particularly relevant in the wake of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which extended the age of Title IV-E eligibility from 18 to 21 years old. Beginning in federal fiscal year 2011, states will be able to claim federal reimbursement for the costs of foster care maintenance payments made on behalf of Title IV-E eligible foster youth until their 21st birthday.

Does Extending Foster Care Help Former Foster Youth Increase their Educational Attainment?

The Midwest Study is a longitudinal investigation 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, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller, 2007).² Baseline data were collected when study participants were ages 17 or 18, and follow-up interviews were conducted when they were ages 19, 21 and 23 or 24.

Based on their analysis of the Midwest Study data collected when these young people were 21 years old, Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack (2007) reported that former foster youth from Illinois were nearly twice as likely to have attended college and more than twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college as their peers in Iowa and Wisconsin. They attributed this difference in educational attainment to the fact that Illinois is one of the few states in which young people can and routinely do remain in foster care until their 21st birthday. By contrast, young people in Iowa and Wisconsin, like young people in most other states, typically exit foster care when they are 18 years old.

In reaching this conclusion, the authors ruled out a number of other potential explanations including between-state differences in high school completion among the former foster youth, between-state differences in their baseline characteristics or placement histories, and between-state differences in college enrollment among young adults in the general population. In fact, estimates from a multivariate model that controlled for baseline characteristics and placement history indicated that being from Illinois,

¹ Eligibility for the ETV program has since been extended to foster youth who are adopted or placed with relative guardians on or after their 16th birthday.

² For additional information about the sample and how it was selected, see Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller (2007).

rather than Iowa or Wisconsin, increased the estimated odds of completing at least one year of college by a factor of four.

Although these data suggest that allowing young people to remain in foster care until their 21st birthday increases their likelihood of completing at least one year of college, only 11 of the Midwest Study participants had an associate's degree and none had a bachelor's degree by age 21. In this issue brief, we address two important questions that the findings of Courtney et al. (2007) raised:

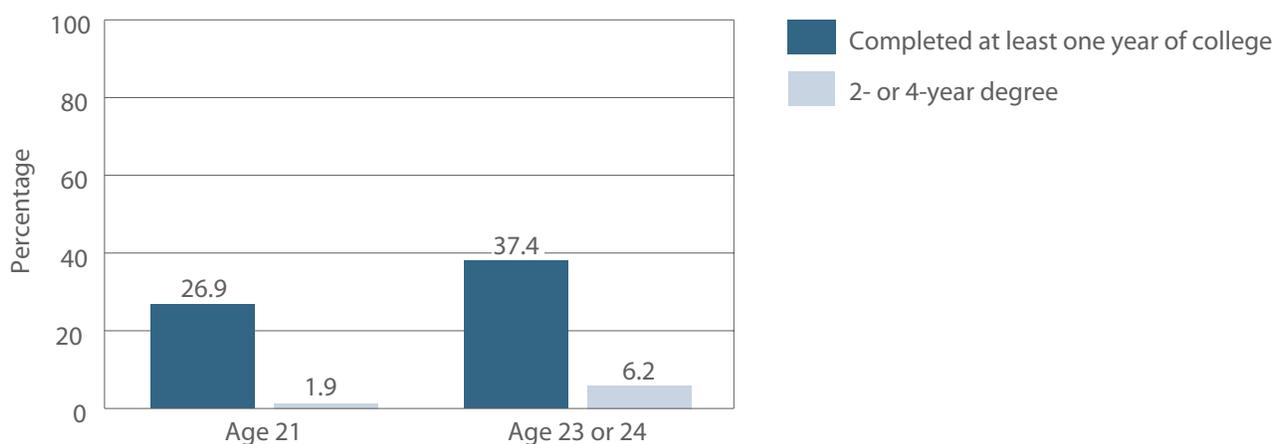
- Would young people making the transition to from foster care to adulthood continue to pursue a college education beyond age 21, and if so, how many would attain a 2- or 4-year degree by age 23 or 24?
- What would happen over time to the between-state differences in college enrollment and attainment that were observed at age 21?

Using data from the fourth wave of interviews that were conducted when the Midwest Study participants

were 23 or 24 years old, we examine their overall level of educational attainment and compare the outcomes of the former foster youth from Illinois to those of their peers from Iowa and Wisconsin. Because we are particularly interested in whether Illinois's policy of extending foster care to age 21 has lasting educational benefits, we combine the Iowa and Wisconsin samples into a single group. This approach also makes sense given that the small size of the Iowa sample limits the ability to make meaningful comparisons among the three states.

With respect to the first question, it is clear from the Midwest Study data that at least some former foster youth do continue to pursue their education beyond age 21. (See Figure 1.) The proportion of Midwest Study participants who had completed at least one year of college rose from 29.6 percent ($n = 175$) at age 21 to 37.4 percent ($n = 225$) at age 23 or 24. However, only 6.2 percent ($n = 37$) of the 23- or 24-year-olds had graduated from college with either an associate's or a bachelor's degree.³ This means that just 16 percent

Figure 1
Educational Attainment at Ages 21 and 23 or 24



³ Thirty-four of the Midwest Study participants who had reported that they had completed at least one year of college when they were interviewed at wave 3 also reported that they had not completed at least one year of college when they were interviewed at wave 4. Because we have no reason to disbelieve what they reported at wave 3, we are reporting the percentage of these Midwest Study participants who indicated that they had completed at least one year of college during either the third or fourth wave of data collection. Had we taken a more conservative approach and considered only the responses given at wave 4, 31.7 percent of these Midwest Study participants would have completed at least one year of college.

of the former foster youth who had completed at least one year of college were college graduates by age 23 or 24. Although these results are disappointing, they are within the range that other studies have reported (Emerson, 2006; Pecora et al., 2003; Wolanin, 2005).

What Are the Barriers to Educational Attainment?

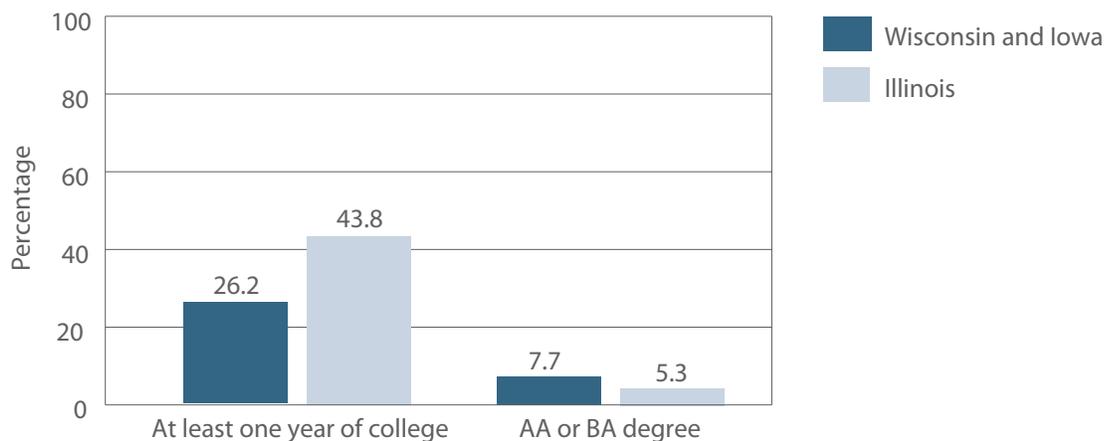
Several factors may help explain why so few of these former foster youth had graduated from college by age 23 or 24. Many had experienced disruptions in their elementary and secondary education. For example, just over one-third had changed schools five or more times and one-quarter had been absent for at least one month. In addition, nearly 40 percent had had to repeat one or more grades. Consequently, some of these young people may have entered college a year or two later than is the norm or been required to take remedial courses—which are generally noncredit—before they were ready to begin college-level work. Others may have needed to postpone their college plans in order to concentrate on

finding a place to live and securing employment.

Given all of these factors, it would not be surprising if some of these young people were still pursuing a college degree at age 23 or 24. In that case, we might expect a much higher percentage of the Midwest Study participants to have graduated from college by the time they are 25 or 26 years old and the fifth wave of data is collected. Unfortunately, that optimism may be misplaced. Only 13.3 percent ($n = 80$) of the Midwest Study participants were currently enrolled in postsecondary educational program at age 23 or 24. Of these, 2 percent already had a 2-year degree and had transferred to a 4-year program ($n = 5$) or had a 4-year degree and were enrolled in graduate school ($n = 6$).

In terms of the second question—whether between-state differences in educational attainment would persist over time, former foster youth from Illinois were still more likely to have completed at least one year of college by age 23 or 24 than their counterparts from Iowa or Wisconsin, although their advantage was smaller than it had been at age 21 (see Figure 2).⁴

Figure 2
Educational Attainment at Ages 21 and 23 or 24: Illinois vs. Iowa and Wisconsin



⁴ Figure 2 shows the percentage of Midwest Study participants who reported that they had completed at least one year of college during either the third or fourth wave of data collection. Had we taken a more conservative approach and only considered the responses given at wave 4, the between-state difference would have been smaller, with 35.4 percent of the Illinois sample and 25.3 percent of the combined Wisconsin and Iowa sample having completed at least one year of college.

However, former foster youth from Illinois were no more likely than their Iowa or Wisconsin counterparts to have earned either a 2- or 4-year degree.

Why did the difference in educational attainment that we observed among the former foster youth from Illinois at age 21 not translate into higher rates of college graduation at age 23 or 24? One possible explanation is that after their 21st birthday, the former foster youth from Illinois were in the same situation that their peers from Iowa and Wisconsin had been in at age 18. Once they were no longer wards of the state, they lost access to all of the services and supports that may have made it possible for them to pursue their educational goals. In addition, they were now responsible for addressing all of their basic needs, including their need for housing, and this may have prevented them from obtaining their college degree.

This explanation is supported by some other data we collected from the Midwest Study participants at age 23 or 24. Of the 502 Midwest Study participants who were not enrolled in school, 37.5 percent ($n = 188$) reported that at least one barrier was preventing them from continuing their education. Of that group, 39.9 percent ($n = 75$) cited not having enough money to pay for school and 19.7 percent ($n = 37$) cited needing to work full time as the biggest barrier they faced. Needing to work was also the most common reason given by the 175 Midwest Study participants who had enrolled in college and then dropped out of school.⁵ Specifically, 41.0 percent ($n = 59$) of those who had dropped out of a 2-year college and 55.9 percent ($n = 19$) of those who had dropped out of a 4-year college cited needing to work as a reason for dropping out.

Between-state differences in the percentage of Midwest Study participants with parenting responsibilities may also help to explain why former foster youth from Illinois were no more likely to have graduated from

college by age 23 or 24 than their peers from Iowa and Wisconsin. Forty-five percent ($n = 172$) of the 23- and 24-year-old Midwest Study participants from Illinois reported being a custodial parent compared with 34.4 percent ($n = 76$) of their counterparts from the other two states.⁶

Parenting responsibilities did prevent some Midwest Study participants, particularly females, from continuing their education. Of the 98 females who reported that at least one barrier was preventing them from continuing their education, 24.5 percent ($n = 24$) identified needing to care for children as the biggest barrier they faced. Parenting responsibilities also contributed to the decision by some Midwest Study participants—primarily females—who had enrolled in college not to persist. Of the 107 females who had dropped out of college, 15.9 percent ($n = 17$) cited needing to care for children as a reason.

Limitations

When interpreting the data reported here, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of the study and our analyses. Our comparison between Illinois on the one hand and Iowa and Wisconsin on the other makes intuitive sense given our interest in the potential impact of the policy of extending foster care to age 21 on educational attainment. However, other differences among the three states in social or educational policy, the characteristics of their child welfare populations, and the larger socioeconomic context may help explain any observed between-state differences in educational outcomes. We have not yet conducted the kinds of analyses that might allow us to account for some of these differences. Moreover, the small size of the Iowa sample severely limits our ability to compare the young people from Iowa to their peers from the other two states. Perhaps most important, the small number

⁵ Of those 175 study participants, 141 had dropped out of a 2-year school, 31 had dropped out of a 4-year school, and 3 had dropped out of both.

⁶ This difference is statistically significant at $p < .01$.

of young people in the Midwest Study with a college degree at age 23 or 24 limits our ability to explain between-state differences in degree completion with any degree of confidence.

Does Allowing Foster Youth to Remain in Care until their 21st Birthday Make a Difference in the Long Run?

The answer to this question is probably of greater interest now than ever before, given that the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 will soon make it much less costly for states to allow young people to remain in foster care until their 21st birthday. On the one hand, young people from the state that has routinely extended foster care until age 21 were no more likely to have graduated from college by age 23 or 24 than their peers in states that do not extend foster care. On the other hand, allowing young people to remain in foster care until their 21st birthday does appear to increase the likelihood that they will complete at least one year of college, and completing any college, even if it does not result in a degree, can still have labor market benefits in the form of higher earnings (Surrette, 1997; Kane & Rouse, 1995), although not as great as the benefits associated with having a degree from a 4- or even a 2-year school.

What remains to be seen is whether the between-state differences that we observed at ages 23 and 24 in the percentage of former foster youth who had completed at least one year of college will ultimately translate into long-term differences in college degree completion. Interviews planned with Midwest Study participants in 2010–2011, when they are 25 and 26 years old, should help answer this question.

In the meantime, what seems clear from these data is that if college graduation rates are to increase among young people aging out of foster care, substantive changes in both policy and practice will need to be

made. First, although the ETV and state tuition-waiver programs make postsecondary education more economically viable for young people aging out of foster care, those programs do not address their equally pressing nonfinancial needs. This is the rationale behind the growing number of programs that provide former foster youth with a wide array of services and supports they need to succeed in school and graduate. Each program is unique, but participants typically receive academic, social/emotional, and logistical supports, including year-round housing, in addition to financial aid. Some of these programs are affiliated with a single college or university, whereas others provide supports to former foster youth at colleges and universities statewide.

To date, not much is known about the effectiveness of these programs with respect to increasing college retention and graduation rates, although a few studies have provided descriptive information (Pontecorvo, El-Askari, & Putnam, 2006; Schultz & Mueller, 2008; Dworsky & Perez, 2009). Given the lack of a methodologically sound impact evaluation, it is far from clear whether similar programs would significantly increase the percentage of foster youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin who graduate from college. That said, it is one option for states to consider if they want to increase the rate of college graduation among young people aging out foster care.

Second, lack of access to affordable housing can be a major barrier to higher education (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). In fact, at least one study has found that former foster youth who participate in campus support programs perceive the housing assistance they receive as important or very important to their success in school, and many expressed concerns about not having a place to live were it not for the program (Dworsky & Perez, 2009). However, not all former foster youth will benefit from such programs, at least in the near term. Thus, more needs to be done to ensure that these young

people have a safe and stable place to live while they are in school.

Although financial aid can be used to help cover housing costs, it may not be enough. For some, the only way to make ends meet may be to both work and attend school. Unfortunately, studies have found that full-time college students are less likely to succeed in school if they work more than 15 to 20 hours a week (Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2009; King, 2002). This may explain why Midwest Study participants who had completed at least one year of college but did not have a degree often cite not having enough money to pay for school or needing to work full time as the biggest barrier to continuing their education and why needing to work was the most common reason given for dropping out of school.

Third, a limitation of the Chafee ETV program as well as some state tuition-waiver programs is that they are designed with a traditional college pathway in mind. According to that model, young people graduate from high school when they are 17 or 18 years old, immediately enter college, and receive a degree 4 years later. This is reflected in the fact that new applicants for ETVs must apply before their 21st birthday, and ETV recipients are only eligible until age 23. Likewise, some state tuition-waiver programs limit eligibility to 5 years of aid (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009).

These restrictions are problematic for a number of reasons. One is that it is often necessary for young people transitioning out of foster care to take remedial courses before they are ready to begin college-level work. Because they typically do not earn college credit for this remediation, taking these courses increases the amount of time it will take for them to graduate. Additionally, as already noted, many young people transitioning out of foster care have been held back at least one grade, and as a result, graduate from high school older than is the norm. Others drop out of high

school and obtain a GED. In either case, these young people will probably be older when they enter college than the traditional model assumes.

Finally, some young people transitioning out of foster care, particularly those who are parenting young children, as many in this population are (Courtney et al., 2007), may decide that they need to focus on securing a place to live and a job to support themselves (and their families) before they can begin to pursue their educational goals. If these young people postpone their college plans, they may find themselves ineligible for the very programs that were meant to increase opportunities for the higher education. One way to remedy this limitation would be to extend eligibility for these programs beyond these arbitrary deadlines. After all, many parents continue to provide their adult children with financial as well as emotional support well into their 20s or even 30s (Fields, 2003; Schoeni & Ross, 2004).

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Related Publications

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