



All Grown Up, Nowhere to Go *Texas teens in foster care transition*



TEXAS FOSTER CARE TRANSITIONS PROJECT

Published February 2001

Pam Hormuth, Project Director

*Research Team: Robin Chandler, Brooke Shertzer, Kaitlin Graham, Liz Mueller, Elizabeth Bailey
Laura Lein, Center for Social Work Research, The University of Texas at Austin*

ABOUT THE TITLE: *All Grown Up, Nowhere to Go*

There are approximately 2,500 former foster youth in Texas between the ages of 18 and 21, who are transitioning from foster care to independence. Transitioning foster youth often leave care without access to any formal system of support. While foster youth are called adults at age 18, many situations arise in their lives where they are treated more like teens than like adults. These young people are at extreme risk of poverty and homelessness, victimization and criminal involvement, illness, early childbearing, and low educational attainment.



FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

*Funded by the Southern Regional Office of
The Casey Family Programs:
Foundations for the Future*

and

The Annie E. Casey Foundation



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Texas Foster Care Transitions Project, a research effort conducted by the Center for Public Policy Priorities, provides a first glimpse of a little-known but extremely vulnerable population of young people in Texas —foster youth who have transitioned from the care of the state to independence. These “emancipated”¹ youth have historically received little help as they move from foster care to independence. Through intensive interviews and other data collection, this qualitative study learned about the challenges and outcomes experienced by transitioning foster youth. The findings of this study are based on intensive interviews and research of transitioning youth, foster parents, the service providers, and other professionals who work with the youth.

Children enter the foster care system when their parents are not able to care for them. Many foster children have been the victims of neglect and abuse in their original homes. When they reach age 18, foster youth “age out” of the system and leave the care of the state. Some foster youth leave care at an earlier age either through a process of emancipation or by running away.

Transitioning foster youth often enter independence without access to any formal system of support. They are at extreme risk of poverty and homelessness, victimization and criminal involvement, illness, early childbearing, and low educational attainment. In addition, many show signs of emotional problems, fractured emotional and social attachments, and dysfunctional relationships as a result of past experiences. While many face the problems of any young adult, they have additional issues directly related to their life experiences leading up to and through foster care.

The Texas Foster Care Transitions project focuses on youth in the central Texas area, particularly San Antonio and Austin, who transitioned from foster care to independence in 1990 and 1999. The research team attempted to locate and interview 513 former foster youth to learn about their challenges as they moved from foster care to independence. The first thing we learned is that emancipated foster youth are a highly mobile and disconnected population and they proved to be very difficult to find. Altogether, we were able to locate and interview 30 young adults with foster care experience.

We located 11 of the young people in our target group of 513 former foster youth in state prison. In fact, a special search of state prison records for all 513 young people in our study revealed that 26 of the foster youth in our sample of 513 had been or were currently incarcerated in state prison (5%). This does not include city or county jails. Eleven youth were incarcerated in state prison at the time of the study (21.4 per 1,000 people in our target sample compared to 12.7 per 1,000 19-29 year olds in the Texas population as a whole).

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by emancipated foster youth, the Texas Foster Care Transitions project conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving 30 young people and 22 service providers and foster parents. These qualitative interviews revealed that transitioning foster youth have many and complex difficulties with housing, health, education, employment, early parenting, incarceration, drug abuse, and more. A content analysis of the interviews with youth and service providers revealed the following trends:

- **Lack of Preparation for Independent Living.** Youth and providers agreed that many emancipated foster youth are unprepared for independent living when they leave the care of the state. Many have little access to services. In fact, our research documents an inconsistent availability of independent living services for youth. While the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services provides independent living training through the Preparation for Adult Living Program (PAL), only half of those we interviewed had received those services. Many young people leave care before these services are provided or refuse to participate in the PAL program. Several youth reported that they would have participated in PAL, but either did not know about the program or lived in rural areas where the program was not available. While some young people who participated in PAL found it helpful, several said that the PAL program did not adequately prepare them for the many challenges they faced living on their own.
- **High Incidence of Untreated Health and Mental Health Problems.** Many emancipating foster youth talked about physical and mental health problems, which they tended to ignore because they had no access to health care services. Close to half of the youth we interviewed (40%) had health problems but more than half (59%) of those interviewed had no health insurance.
- **Fear and Loneliness.** Many young people on their own for the first time experience extreme fear and loneliness. Many are alone for the first time after years of group living and are actually afraid to live alone. Most also lack any home base for emotional and other support.

- **Homelessness.** The lack of housing affordability and accessibility creates a major challenge for emancipated youth. Close to half of the youth we interviewed (40%) had experienced homelessness at least once.
- **Financial Insecurity.** Frequent moves while in foster care can lead to low educational attainment. Most foster children left the system lacking job skills, leading in turn to unemployment and underemployment. While 75 percent of our interview sample had graduated from high school, more than half (60%) had a history of unemployment and financial instability.

In spite of great need for support, emancipated foster youth are disconnected from the resources and opportunities that most kids have and all kids need. Because most have no family to turn to for support, many develop other coping strategies to deal with the enormous challenges they face. These strategies are often self-sabotaging and dysfunctional, sending them spiraling into worse circumstances. Some of these strategies include:

- **Removing themselves from available help.** Many foster youth leave the system before their 18th birthday, often acting out in defiance of a system they perceive is too controlling and/or not sensitive to their needs. This essentially closes them off to what help may be offered. Almost half of the young people we interviewed had left care before turning 18.
- **Engaging in risky lifestyles.** Foster youth who reach their teen years often engage in risky behaviors such as drug use, early parenting, dropping out of school, and criminal involvement or victimization. The in-depth interviews revealed that one in five former foster youth had been arrested at least once, one in five reported having been the victim of a crime, and one in five reported a history of substance abuse.

- **Returning to birth families.** Many transitioning youth attempt to reconnect with birth families. While some families may have received help and are now truly able to help their children, many still are not in a position to be a positive force in the youth's lives. Eighty percent of our interview sample had been in contact with their birth family since leaving care. While this reconnection may be good for some, it can sometimes have negative consequences.
- **Learning to get by, but not get ahead.** Transitioning youth learn to live from day to day and often are unable to develop long-range goals and career strategies.
- **Emancipating foster youth often do not get the help they need before, during, or after transition.** Many emancipating teens fit the description of youth who are hard to serve—they may have “bad” attitudes and act out: they may not be “cute” or follow mainstream social norms; they may have drug abuse problems, be pregnant, or leave care early. Some have serious health problems or mental illness. These teens often do not get the help they need and their situations become even more dire.

Transitioning foster youth often do not have the advantages of a healthy, supportive family, yet they are expected to cope with adult situations when they are not fully prepared to do so. We categorize foster youth as adults at age 18, but many situations arise in their lives where they are treated more like teens than like adults. For example, the jobs they are likely to get often do not pay a living wage or have health insurance. It is very difficult for young people to get credit. Many apartment complexes will not even consider young applicants. These young people are asked to be adults in a world that does not always think of them as adults.

As a result of the findings in this research, several recommendations are put forward. Here is a summary of the greatest needs:

- **Build a bridge to future success.** Foster caregivers should work together with other community members to plan a transition that is appropriate to each individual young person. If help begins before transition and young people are provided more assistance during and after emancipation, their outcomes will improve because they will stay connected to resources and help. Our communities should take youth by the hand and walk with them across the bridge to adulthood.
- **Expand independent living skills training and start early.** Foster youth need practical knowledge in a vast array of independent living skills. All foster youth should be provided training that will enable them to develop meaningful skills needed into adulthood.
- **Connect youth to resources and opportunities**
Job Training and Placement: All transitioning foster youth need job training and placement assistance. Some youth may go to college, but not all foster youth are destined to attend college. For those who will not attend college, opportunities should exist to gain job training and work experience while in care. When they leave care, job training and placement assistance become most crucial.

Transitional housing A continuum of care should be established for youth with varying amounts of need for supervision and care. There should be opportunities for foster youth to practice living independently in half-way

houses or dorms, for example, before becoming totally independent. Housing assistance should be provided that is appropriate for individual levels of self-sufficiency.

Medical and Mental Health Care: Introduce and pass legislation — and appropriate the necessary funding — that will permit the implementation of Medicaid coverage for emancipating foster youth to age 21. Provide avenues for emotional support and mental health services.

Mentors: Upon leaving care, transitioning foster youth need healthy, functioning adults in their lives to serve as role models and to provide guidance, emotional support, or just an understanding ear when they need to talk about what's happening to them and how they feel about it.

Education: A good education is essential to future success after emancipation. However, because foster youth move so frequently, they often fall behind in school and have a very difficult time completing their graduation requirements. These youth need a stable school career and someone to actively advocate for them in the school system. While Texas does provide tuition assistance to some transitioning youth who go to college, they need more financial and emotional support.

Financial support and services: Independence without financial support often sets transitioning youth up for failure. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 allows states to use part of new funding for older youth that have left care but are not yet 21. Texas should plan to provide as much support for this age group as possible. In addition, many transitioning youth will be eligible for helping services as soon as they leave care (e.g.,

Medicaid, Food Stamps, TANF). Steps should be taken before they leave care to make sure youth know how to get the help they may be eligible for and need.

- **Give providers knowledge of other resources to make competent referrals.** All foster caregivers and service providers should have knowledge about available community resources and how to connect foster youth with those resources.
- **Provide community systems of support.** A network of families, churches, and other community organizations should be developed for youth to use for emotional and practical support. Transitioning youth need a centralized place in the community where they can gain access to information, resources, and services.
- **Tracking and data collection.** Texas needs reliable outcome information to better plan services for this population. There is little available data about emancipated foster youth. Systematic data collection before, during and after transition would enhance the state's ability to help transitioning youth. The Foster Care Independence Act mandates that states develop outcome measures to assess state performance in the areas of educational attainment, employment, avoidance of dependency on public assistance, homelessness, out-of-wedlock births, high-risk behaviors, and incarceration. Therefore, Texas must develop a comprehensive systematic approach to tracking former foster youth that involves all participants in the system (youth, foster parents, residential programs, Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, and all other agencies and providers that serve or should be serving this population).

- **Fully implement Foster Care Independence Act!**

Help is on the way in the form of new federal legislation and a block grant to the states to serve this population at risk. The passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 authorized an increase of federal block grant funds for independent living services, from \$70 million in FY 1999 to \$140 million in FY 2000. The Act helps youth who remain in foster care until age 18 by providing additional independent living services. States must also use the money to help transitioning youth finish high school (or get a GED), obtain vocational training and job readiness skills, attain employment and housing, access medical services, and meet mentors who will help them through their transition period.

Specifically, the Act **requires** the states to:

- Use the Title IV-E training funds to train foster care providers regarding independent living issues facing teens who are preparing to transition from foster care. The Foster Care Independence Act gives states the flexibility to define their own age guidelines for services. If regional budgets allow, all children should receive services starting at age 14.
- Develop outcome measures to assess state performance in the areas of educational attainment, employment, avoidance of dependency on public assistance, homelessness, out-of-wedlock births, high-risk behaviors, and incarceration.
- Use part of the funding to help older youth who have left care but are not yet 21.

The law **allows** the states to:

- Use up to 30 percent of their allotted money for transitional housing for 18-21 year olds who have left the foster care system.

- Increase the amount of assets that youth are allowed to own from \$1,000 to \$10,000. This allows youth in care to save up to \$10,000 and still be eligible for federal foster care payments.
- Expand Medicaid coverage to youth 18-21 years of age (or some subset of this group) who were in care on their 18th birthday. States will be allowed, but not required, to provide Medicaid coverage to former foster youth ages 18-21. However, each state will be given flexibility regarding whether to provide coverage at all; to what age (19, 20, or 21); whether to only provide it to foster youth who were receiving Title IV-E funding while in care; and whether to provide it only to eligible youth whose assets, resources, and incomes fall below certain levels. It is therefore imperative that the Texas State Legislature pass legislation (HB98) — and appropriate the necessary funding — that will permit the implementation of Medicaid coverage for emancipated foster youth. If this legislation passes during the 77th Legislative session, Medicaid coverage could begin in September 2001.
- Spend additional money on adoption incentive payments in order to find permanent homes for children in foster care. The funding for the adoption incentives is not included in the independent living funds.

The Foster Care Independence Act should be implemented in Texas to provide as much assistance to emancipating foster youth as possible.

Conclusion

The emancipating foster youth in our study were amazing young people. Their openness and honesty in telling their stories was astounding and enlightening. Despite great adversity, many exhibited resiliency, resourcefulness, and insight.

One young man, who despite great personal adversity, maintained a sense of optimism, reflected in this comment:

“Look around your personal landscape, there are things to be grateful for, you have had an oasis or two along the way or you wouldn’t have made it this far.”

-Former foster youth, age 27

Several former foster youth attributed their survival and success to one person or one asset that assisted them in independent living. Many reported that the difference between success and failure hinged on one friend or family member— perhaps the person who took them in when they didn’t have a place to stay, the person who gave them a car so they could get to work, or the caseworker who helped them get training. We all have an obligation to work together to ensure that these young people can find the oases they need along their way.

¹ The term “emancipated” is used in this report to refer to all young people who have left the foster care system either by formal release from the foster care system at their request, by aging out at age 18 years, or by running away from the system before their 18th birthday. This group is interchangeably referred to in this report as “emancipated,” “transitioning,” or “former” foster youth.