



Research Watch: March 20, 2008

Study finds that placement difficulties for youth in foster care predict difficulties in transitioning to adulthood

Source: Keller, E., Cusick, T., Gretchen, R., & Courtney, M.E. (2007). Approaching the transition to adulthood: Distinctive profiles of adolescents aging out of the child welfare system. *Social Service Review*, 81(3), 454-484.

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Many youth in foster care experience inconsistent parenting, school problems, and other difficulties associated with their placement experience, particularly when placement disruption results in frequent moves in care. Such challenges may influence youth aging out of the child welfare system, playing a part in the considerable challenges many experience in their transition to emancipation and adulthood. This study uses a person-oriented approach to examine the differences in a large, representative sample of youth emancipating from the child welfare system in three Midwestern states (Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin), with the goal of categorizing subpopulations of youth by examining their capacity for making a successful transition to adulthood. Four subpopulations of youth in care with distinctive profiles were empirically developed and examined for life experiences: a) the largest group, representing 43 percent of the sample population, consisted of adolescents that were more likely to report placement instability, episodes of running away, and placement in non-familial family settings; b) the second largest group, representing 38 percent of the sample population, consisted of youth with less problematic behavioural manifestations and higher levels of employment opportunities; c) the third group, representing 13 percent of the sample population, had the highest level of problematic behavioural manifestations, and lived predominantly in traditional non-familial foster care; and d) the smallest group, representing 5 percent of the sample population of youth, had the highest rate of parenthood and grade delay, and the lowest rate of employment experiences. Analyses of these four subpopulations with respect to broad outcomes found that the profile which represented the largest sample population of youth seemed more likely to experience difficulties in the transition to adulthood. Compared to other youth, youth experiencing difficulties with their transition to adulthood are more likely to have experienced multiple placements, episodes of running away, and placement in non-familial settings.

Methodological notes: The sample was obtained during the period from April 2002 to June 2002. Of the 770 youth identified for the study, 732 consented to participate and completed the baseline interview, consisting of a response rate of 95 percent. To date, this is the largest known prospective study of youth emancipating from the child welfare system. Given that successful transition to adulthood is associated with the past

experiences and current circumstances of youth aging out of the child welfare system, the study examines seven indicators of individual status prior to the transition to adulthood. They are: 1) employment; 2) grade retention; 3) parenthood; 4) problem behaviour; 5) placement type; 6) placement stability; and 7) runaway history. Model fit-analysis and latent class analysis were used to examine the likelihood that youth fall within each of the four sample categories based on their life experiences in child welfare. In sum, the application of empirical person-oriented methods of analysis, which are based on the seven selected indicators of child welfare experience, identified four subpopulations of youth that exhibited distinctive profiles in their ability to successfully transition to adulthood. Despite the large sample size, this study used cross-sectional data to reflect conditions at a single point in time and should not be generalized for youth aging out of care. These limitations notwithstanding, this study empirically determines which conditions are likely to co-occur, and this is a valuable step toward understanding and predicting broad outcomes for youth aging out of the child welfare system. Further qualitative investigations with samples from each of the four identified subpopulations of youth are suggested in order to explore the specific pathways of youth aging out of care.