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Study Finds More Woes Following Foster Care

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

Only half the youths who had turned 18 and “aged out” of [foster care](#) were employed by their mid-20s. Six in 10 men had been convicted of a crime, and three in four women, many of them with children of their own, were receiving some form of public assistance. Only six in 100 had completed even a [community college](#) degree.

The dismal outlook for youths who are thrust into a shaky adulthood from the foster care system — now numbering some 30,000 annually — has been documented with new precision by a long-term study released Wednesday, the largest to follow such children over many years.

Researchers studied the outcomes for 602 youths in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin, and compared them with their peers who had not been in foster care. Most youths had entered the foster care system in their early teens and then were required to leave it at 18 or, in the case of Illinois, 21.

“We took them away from their parents on the assumption that we as a society would do a better job of raising them,” said [Mark Courtney](#), a social work researcher at the [University of Washington](#) who led the study with colleagues from the [Partners for Our Children](#) program at Washington and the [Chapin Hall](#) center at the [University of Chicago](#). “We’ve invested a lot of money and time in their care, and by many measures they’re still doing very poorly.”

Over the last decade, the federal government and many states have started to assist former foster care youths with education grants, temporary housing subsidies and, in some places, extra years of state custody and support. The new data showed that just over half of them are doing reasonably well and benefit from such aid. But they throw a spotlight, researchers said, on two groups that need more sweeping and lasting help.

About one-fourth of the people in the study, mainly women, are receiving public aid and struggling to raise their own children, usually without a high school degree. Researchers found that one in five in a second group, mainly men, are badly floundering, with multiple criminal convictions, low education and incomes and, often, mental health or substance abuse problems.

Once they leave foster care, these most troubled youths often have no reliable adults to advise them or provide emotional support, said Gary Stangler, director of the [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities](#)

[Initiative](#), a private foundation. “When these kids make a mistake, it’s life altering, they have nothing to fall back on,” Mr. Stangler said.

Finding a mentor who provides “that backbone you need” has made all the difference, said Cameron Anderson, 21, of Tampa, Fla., who entered foster care at 15 after he got into trouble with the law, then lived in group homes.

Mr. Anderson, who is now in community college and works at a printer cartridge company, receives education and other financial aid that has helped him keep an apartment. But he has made some missteps since moving out on his own, he said, like not paying bills in full so he could buy shoes and hanging out with old friends who were bad influences.

Last fall, he was introduced to a mentor, an investor in Tampa, by a Casey program, Connected by 25. The two now speak daily, Mr. Anderson said, discussing “school and life in general, even to the point where he’ll say, ‘Hey, are you using protection?’ ”

Had he had such a relationship earlier, Mr. Anderson said, “it would have saved me from a ton of bridges I’ve had to cross.”

While younger children are often adopted when their parents’ rights are terminated, fewer prospective parents want to adopt teenagers. Recent research, including the new study, shows that most foster children, even though they have been removed from their homes, maintain ties with a parent or other relative. Some agencies are trying to support such ties or to locate relatives who might adopt the children or provide long-term support.

Illinois, New York, Vermont and the District of Columbia now allow youths to remain in foster care to age 21, and some states help with transitional housing.

Congress in 2008 passed a law providing matching money to states that extend foster care to age 21, something that the authors of the study call for. But in the face of large budget deficits, few states have signed on so far.

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