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## A Population at Risk: Youth "Aging Out" of the Foster Care System and Implications for Extension

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### Abstract

Youth who age out of the foster care system are faced with many unique challenges. This article offers an overview of risk factors found within this group, occurring both before and after discharge from care. Suggestions are given for the creation of Extension programs that address the specific needs of this growing population.

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According to national estimates, approximately 20,000 children "age out" of foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Aging out of foster care refers to children who are discharged from care, namely care that is no longer provided by the government, usually between the ages of 18 and 21. Many of these young adults are forced into independence, with little to no resources helping them assume adult responsibilities. Outlined below are highlighted risk factors and future difficulties that these young adults may face when leaving the foster care system.

## Risk Factors for Youth Leaving the Foster System

### Homelessness

Numbers of homeless youth are the products of the foster care system (Lenz-Rashid, 2004). Many youth who aged out of foster care report being homeless at some point in time after discharge. Approximately 14% of males and 10% of females report being homeless at least once since their discharge from foster care services (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). At such a critical stage of the development, these young adults who should be focused on establishing themselves as independent members of society, struggle with finding housing on their own. Many are forced on the street and/or to homeless shelters for a significant period, often persisting throughout their lifespan.

### Employment & Job Training

Due to limited work histories and/or lackluster job training, many former foster children will face difficulty finding employment. Those who do obtain employment may be forced to work low-paying jobs, making them susceptible to exploitation, poverty, and increased difficulty establishing their independence (Lenz-Rashid, 2004). Poor job preparation and limited skills training place foster children at an unfair disadvantage when facing the job market. In a multi-state study of youth exiting the foster care system, three-fourths reported not getting any type of career counseling and over 50% reported no training in regards to job application or interviewing.

### Substance Use and Abuse

Foster care youth are a vulnerable group with a high risk for substance use and abuse. In this population of youth, illegal drugs are used because of experimentation and peer pressure, self-medication due to lack of health care, and coping mechanisms for stress. Substance use in former foster care youth is high (Wertheimer, 2002), often higher than that found in their peers who have

no foster care history (Lenz-Rashid, 2004).

## **Health and Well-being**

Many youth upon leaving foster care face additional issues in relation to their physical and mental health. Unexpected pregnancies are often faced by many newly emancipated youth. Unstable housing situations, limited life skills, a yearning for love and something to nurture (Nicoletti, 2007), and family patterns of instability and risk can all contribute to the early childbearing found within this group.

Subsequent to limited relationship experience and lack of effective relationship models, this group is at an increased risk for poor individual and relational adjustment. Mental health issues such as depression, mental illness, and anxiety are high and put these youth at more risk for negative outcomes once out of the system (Lopez & Allen, 2007).

## **What Determines Risk for "Aged-Out Youth"?**

The experiences faced by youth aging out of care can be determined by many factors, occurring both before and after leaving foster care. Positive experiences result when youth receive services that prepare them for independence, the quality of care they received while in the foster care system, greater numbers of support networks, and having employment established before discharge. Youth who report negative experiences had more foster care placements, fewer support networks, and less education or formal training (Reilly, 2003).

## **Areas for Change**

Research has highlighted key areas that must be addressed in order to increase the positive outcomes for youth who age out of the foster care system: education, training, housing options, and continued mental and physical health care. Existing and future Extension programs can target many of the above needs within this population. Using a multi-disciplinary approach, Extension agents have numerous areas of intervention for this group and can deliver programs on many levels. Collaborative relationships with secondary and post-secondary educators, health care providers, career counselors, juvenile justice, child and family services, and other community partners will enhance effective programming for these youth.

Extension program suggestions:

- Family and Consumer Sciences
  - Financial literacy, budgeting, money management
  - Nutrition education, food/diet, food safety
  - Health care access and education, disease prevention, reproductive information
  - Mental health resources for specialized services, depression, stress management
  - Permanent and safe housing options
  - Relationship adjustment, pre-marital/marital education, parenting
  - Career placement and job training
  - Educational programs and post-secondary options
- Community Development
  - Community relationships for support after discharge
  - Youth-adult partnerships for community advocacy
  - Volunteer involvement in training youth

Extension programming can begin with youth who are within the foster care system, in an attempt to decrease their risk once they transition out. Other services should be aimed at those youth who are beginning to negotiate the transitioning process, those turning 17 or 18 years old.

## **Summary**

Extension can be a great resource for youth aging out of the foster care system. This population is in desperate need of education and intervention both pre and post discharge from foster care. Program development and delivery in this area can have impacts not only on the experiences of the youth, but also affect the community as a whole.

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