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**Employment Needs of
Foster Youth in Illinois:
Findings from the
Midwest Study**

**Amy Dworsky
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Child
welfare
fare

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Introduction

Since it was created in 1999 as part of the Foster Care Independence Act, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program has been providing states with funds to help foster youth making the transition to adulthood achieve self-sufficiency. A major purpose of the program is to ensure that youth who remain in foster care until age 18 or older “receive the education, training and services necessary to obtain employment.” Unfortunately, the limited research that has been done on young adults who “aged out” of foster care has found that their labor market outcomes are generally quite poor. This suggests that the employment-related needs of foster youth are not currently being met.

Labor Market Outcomes of Former Foster Youth

Studies of young adults who aged out of foster care consistently find that far too many of these former foster youth are either not working or not stably employed. Moreover, even when they do have jobs, their earnings are very low (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2007; Dworsky, 2005; Dworsky & Courtney, 2001; George et al., 2002; Macomber et al., 2008).

Several of these studies have relied on state administrative data, primarily child welfare and Unemployment Insurance wage records. For example, McMillen and Tucker (1999) analyzed administrative and case record data for 252 Missouri foster youth who were at least 17 years old when their child welfare case was closed between October 1992 and September 1993. Although 63.4 percent of these young people had ever been employed prior to leaving care, only 38 percent were employed at the time of their discharge. The odds of being employed were higher for youth who had had fewer placements and youth who had completed school, even after controlling for other factors.

Researchers at the Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago examined the employment and earnings of foster youth from California, Illinois, and South Carolina who aged out of care the year they turned 18, over a period of 13 quarters: the four quarters prior to their 18th birthday, the quarter in which they turned 18, and the eight quarters following their 18th birthday (Goerge et

al., 2002). No more than 45 percent of the foster youth in any of the three states had earnings in a given quarter. In fact, 30 percent of the Illinois foster youth, 23 percent of the California foster youth, and 14 percent of the South Carolina foster youth had no earnings at all. Although mean quarterly earnings rose approximately \$500 over the 13 quarters, they remained very low: \$1,089 for Illinois foster youth, \$1,097 for South Carolina foster youth, and \$1,364 for the California foster youth.

Comparing the labor market outcomes of these foster youth to those of foster youth who had been reunified with their families between their 14th and 18th birthdays, the researchers found that although foster youth who had aged out were more likely to have been employed, they earned significantly less. Employment and earnings were not consistently related to either demographic or placement history characteristics. The one exception was that African Americans earned significantly less than their White counterparts in all three states. The researchers also noted that working prior to age 18 seemed to increase likelihood of employment post-discharge, which suggests that it is important for young people to gain some work experience while they are still in foster care.

Dworsky and Courtney (2001) examined the outcomes of 1,819 former foster youth who were discharged from Wisconsin's child welfare system between 1995 and 1997. Although most of these young people exited by aging out or through reunification, young people who had run away, been institutionalized, placed with relatives, or adopted were also included. Nearly 80 percent of these former foster youth were employed in at least one of their first eight post-discharge quarters. However, those who were employed earned a median of \$4478 during the first eight quarters after they were discharged from care. This is substantially less than what a typical full-time minimum wage worker would have earned (\$17,680 assuming the minimum wage prior to August 1996 of \$4.25, or \$21,424 assuming the minimum wage after August 1996 of \$5.15).

A series of multivariate analyses revealed that, all other things being equal, former foster youth who were African American were less likely to be employed and had lower earnings if they were employed than former foster youth who were White. Several placement history characteristics were also related to labor market outcomes. Former foster youth who had been discharged from foster homes were more likely to have been employed, and earned more than those who had been discharged from child caring institutions. Similarly, former foster youth who were reunified, placed with relatives, or adopted earned more than those who had run away or been transferred to an institution, but less than those who had aged out of care or been discharged to independent living.

Dworsky (2005) also examined the employment and earnings of 8,511 former foster youth who had been discharged from Wisconsin's out-of-home care system between 1992 and 1998 at a minimum age of 16 years old. Although the vast majority of these former foster youth were employed in at least one of the first eight quarters after they were discharged from care, most

experienced at least one quarter in which they did not work. Even more troubling was that their average total earnings for the first eight quarters after their discharge were below the poverty threshold for a single year. In addition, the increase in quarterly earnings over time was not enough to lift them out of poverty, even eight years post-discharge. African Americans and Latinos experienced less favorable labor market outcomes than their White counterparts, and the older former foster youth were when they were discharged from care, the more likely they were to experience favorable labor market outcomes.

Utah's Department of Human Services examined the labor market outcomes of 926 young people who aged out of foster care between 1999 and 2003 (Singer, 2006). Eighty-six percent had some earnings within three years of leaving care. However, and despite a robust economy and strong job growth, their annual earnings were, on average, considerably less than one would earn working full time at a minimum wage job (\$10,753) and less than the poverty threshold for a single individual in 2005 (\$9,570).

Most recently, Macomber and colleagues (2008) compared the labor market outcomes of young people who aged out of foster care in California, Minnesota, and North Carolina to the labor market outcomes of (1) youth from low-income families and (2) a nationally representative sample from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97). All of the former foster youth had been 17 years old and in foster care on December 31, 1998.

The young people who aged out of foster care experienced low rates of employment and had low earnings well into their mid-twenties. Average monthly earnings for former foster youth who were working at age 24 ranged from a low of \$450 in North Carolina to a high of \$690 in California, compared with \$1,535 in the general population. Even when their outcomes were compared with the outcomes of youth from low-income families, the young people who aged out of foster care were less likely to be employed and earned substantially less.¹

The researchers also found that foster youth tend to follow one of four employment trajectories as they transition to adulthood. One-third to one-half follow a path that leads to relatively positive employment outcomes by age 24. These include the "consistently connected" youth whose probability of being employed remains relatively high between the ages of 18 and 24, and whose average earnings are comparable to those of their peers in the general population, as well as the "later connected" youth who were not connected to the workforce prior to age 18 but whose probability of employment and earnings increase throughout their early twenties.

The other one-half to two-thirds exhibit patterns leading to poorer outcomes. These include the "never connected" youth who have a very low probability of employment and very low earnings at any time between ages 18 and 24 or prior to age 18, as well as the "initially connected" youth

¹ The difference in earnings between the former foster youth from North Carolina and youth from low-income families was not statistically significant once demographic controls were introduced.

who had connections to the workforce through their late teens but whose probability of employment rapidly declined in their early twenties—perhaps due to changes to jobs not covered by UI data, moves out of state, incarceration, or childbearing—and whose average earnings were never high.

Some young people who were working at age 21 did not remain employed through age 24, which suggests that some youth may need additional assistance staying connected to the labor market or accessing adult service systems. However, employment prior to age 18 was associated with positive labor market outcomes at age 24. Thus, helping youth connect to the workforce may have long-term benefits.

Other studies have examined the labor market outcomes of former foster youth by collecting survey data directly from young people who are or were in foster care. As part of the Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study, Courtney et al. (2001) interviewed 141 Wisconsin foster youth, ages 17 and 18, who had been in care for a minimum of 18 months. Eighty percent, or 113, of these young people completed a second interview 12–18 months after their discharge from care, and 72 percent, or 102, completed a third interview approximately three years post-discharge. All three interviews included questions about employment and preparation for independent living. At the time of that second interview, 61 percent of the young people were currently employed and 81 percent had ever been employed since discharge. Mean weekly earnings among those who were employed were \$185, and ranged from a low of \$54 to a high of \$613. To date, no findings from the third wave have been published or presented.

Another longitudinal study, the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Courtney et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007), has been following young people aging out of foster care and transitioning to adulthood in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Baseline survey data were collected between May 2002 and March 2003 from 732 17- and 18-year-old foster youth who had entered care before their 16th birthday and were still in care on their 17th. A second wave of survey data was collected from 82 percent ($N=603$) of these young people between March and December 2004 when most were age 19 and third wave of survey data was collected from 81 percent ($N=591$) of these young people between March 2006 and January 2007 when nearly all were age 21. All three interviews covered a wide variety of topics, including employment and earnings.

The percentage of Midwest Study participants who were currently employed increased over time from 35 percent at baseline, to 41 percent at age 19, to 52 percent at age 21. Both the mean number of hours worked per week (22.6 at baseline, 32.6 at age 19, and 35.4 at age 21) and the mean hourly wage (\$6.39 at baseline, \$7.54 at age 19, and \$8.85 at age 21) also increased among those who were employed.

Some of the young people who were not employed when the survey data were collected did have work experience. At baseline, 39 percent of the study participants were not employed but had

previously worked for pay. Likewise, the percentage of study participants who were not working, but had held a job within the past year was 27 percent at age 19 and age 21.

The researchers also compared their foster youth sample to a nationally representative sample of same-aged peers who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The Midwest Study participants were less likely to be employed both at age 19 (41 vs. 58%) and at age 21 (52 % vs. 64 %), and this difference could not be explained by school enrollment.² That is, Midwest Study participants were less likely than young people in the general population to be *either working or enrolled in school*.

In addition to these longitudinal studies, several cross-sectional studies have examined the labor market outcomes of young people aging out of foster care. For example, Reilly (2001) interviewed 100 young people from Clark County (Las Vegas) Nevada who had aged out of care a minimum of six months but no more than three years ago and were at least 18 years old when their case was closed. Sixty-three percent were employed at the time of the interview, but 26 percent had not had been regularly employed since exiting, and 55 percent had been terminated from at least one job. Although \$7.25 was the average hourly wage of the young people who were currently employed, 34 percent earned less than \$5,000, and 60 percent earned less than \$10,000 in 1999.

More recently, researchers at Wayne State University surveyed 264 former foster youth (mean age = 20.6 years old) in three Detroit metropolitan area counties (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb) who had aged out in 2002 or 2003 (Fowler et al., 2006).³ All of these young people were at least 18 years old when their child welfare case was closed. On average, they had been employed 51 percent of the time since leaving care. Although 41 percent had been employed continuously, 14 percent had not worked at all. When they were employed, their median earnings were \$600 per month, which translates into \$7,200 per year, if they were continuously employed—far lower than the poverty threshold for a household of one.

Two other studies of former foster youth are also worth mentioning, although they did not focus exclusively on young adults who had “aged out” of foster care. Pecora and colleagues (2003) interviewed 1,087 young adults, ages 20 to 51, who had received foster care services from Casey Family Programs, a private child welfare agency with 23 sites in 13 states, for a minimum of 12 months between 1966 and 1998, and had been discharged at least one year prior to their

² Comparable Add Health employment data were not available for the baseline interview because youth were only asked if they had been employed within the past four weeks.

³ Although the sample comprised only 30 percent of the 867 former foster youth who were eligible to participate in the study, it was representative in terms of demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, and ethnicity) and foster care experiences (e.g., number of placements, age at entry, reason for placement).

interview.⁴ Eighty-eight percent of the alumni, who were 25 to 34 years old and in the labor force, were currently employed. This is slightly lower than the employment rate among this age group in the general population.⁵ Although the researchers did not report annual earnings, they did note that median personal (\$16,500) and household (\$27,500) income were low, which suggests that alumni were struggling to earn a living wage.

Pecora and colleagues (2005) also interviewed 479 young adults between the ages of 20 and 33 who had spent 12 or more uninterrupted months in family-foster care between the ages of 14 and 18.⁶ These young adults had received foster care services from Casey Family Programs or from the public child welfare agencies in Oregon or Washington State between 1988 and 1998.⁷ Eighty percent of the foster care alumni who were in the labor force were currently employed, compared with an employment rate of 95 percent for 20-to 34-year-olds in the general population.⁸ Although annual earnings were not reported, the mean income of alumni who were working was low. One-third had household incomes below the poverty threshold. By contrast, only 21 percent had a household income that was at least three times higher.

Additional information about the employment outcomes of this population will soon become available due to a provision in the Foster Care Independence Act which mandated the creation of a National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD).⁹ Beginning in FY 2011, and every three years thereafter, states will be required to collect survey data from all youth who are in foster care on their 17th birthday. States will be required to survey a sample of these young people again at ages 19 and 21. Among the outcomes states must measure are current employment status (employed full-time, employed part-time, or not employed) and the acquisition of employment-related skills through apprenticeships, internships, or on-the-job training.

Preparing Foster Youth for Employment

Almost a decade after the Foster Care Independence Act was signed into law, not much is known about the services and supports that foster youth receive to prepare them for employment (U.S. GAO, 1999; 2004). As part of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), states will

⁴ These young adults represented 68 percent of the 1,609 alumni served by the 23 Casey Field offices operating in 1998.

⁵ Alumni not in the labor force included full-time students, homemakers, and people with severe disabilities.

⁶ These young adults represent 73 percent of the 659 alumni whose case records were reviewed.

⁷ Nearly all of the Casey Family Programs alumni had been served by a public child welfare agency before being placed with the private agency.

⁸ Alumni not in the labor force included full-time students, homemakers, and people with severe disabilities.

⁹ Although the provision regarding NYTD was included in the 1999 legislation, proposed regulations were not published until July 2006, and the final rule was not published until February 2008.

soon be required to provide the Children's Bureau with information about the Chafee-funded independent living services that foster youth receive in each of 11 categories. Two of those categories are specifically related to employment: career preparation, which includes services to develop the ability of foster youth "to find, apply for, and retain appropriate employment" and employment programs or vocational training, which includes services to build "skills for a specific trade, vocation, or career." However, states are not required to begin reporting those data until Fiscal Year 2011.

Until then, what little information we currently have comes from just a handful of studies. Courtney et al. (2001) asked their sample of 141 Wisconsin foster youth about different types of independent living skills training that they may have received. The vast majority reported that they had received training to help them find (86 %) and keep (74 %) a job. They also found that foster youth were more likely to receive independent living skills training from their foster parents (39 %) than from an independent living program (32 %) or from a group home or child care institution (7 %).¹⁰ This suggests that much of the training these foster youth received to help prepare them for employment was provided informally.

Unfortunately, it seems that this training did not translate into "concrete assistance." When these same foster youth were no longer in care (12 to 18 months later), only 18 percent reported that they had received job training, only 14 percent reported that they had received help with a job search, and only 11 percent reported that they had received assistance with job interviews. Moreover, despite whatever training they received, one-third did not feel prepared to find a job, although another third reported feeling very prepared.

Researchers have also been collecting longitudinal data on the receipt of employment-related services from the young people in the Midwest Study. Just over two-thirds had received at least one employment or vocational support service prior to their baseline interview.¹¹ They were most likely to have received help completing job applications (46 %), developing interview skills (45 %), securing work permits or Social Security cards (40 %), and understanding workplace values (36 %). In addition, nearly one-third had participated in a summer employment program. However, only two percent were currently enrolled in a program that provided vocational training.

¹⁰ The question about the source of independent living skills training was not specifically about training related to employment.

¹¹ Courtney et al. (2004) asked about the following: vocational counseling, resume-writing workshops, identifying potential employers, completing job applications, developing interview skills, job referrals or placement, using career resource libraries, understanding benefits coverage, securing work permits or Social Security cards, understanding workplace values, internships, and summer employment programs.

Receipt of employment and vocational support services declined over time. At age 19, 43 percent of the Midwest Study participants reported that they had received at least one employment or vocational support service *since their first interview* (Courtney et al., 2005). No single service was reported by more than 28 percent, and only three services were reported by a fifth or more: help completing job applications, help developing interview skills, and help with job placement or referral. Enrollment in vocational training programs was still very low (8 %).

Only 29 percent of the Midwest Study participants who were interviewed at age 21 reported that they had received at least one employment or vocational service since their last interview, and only one service (i.e., help developing interview skills) was reported by at least 20 percent (Courtney et al., 2006). On a more positive note, most of the young people who received employment and vocational support services perceived them as being somewhat (45 %) or very (33 %) helpful. Moreover, 37 percent of these 21-year-olds had received job training since their last interview, including 9.5 percent who were currently enrolled in a program.

At least some of the post-baseline drop-off in the receipt of employment and vocational support services can probably be attributed to the transition of these young people out of foster care. Although *former* foster youth are eligible for Chafee-funded services until age 21—including services to help them find and maintain a job—49 percent of the Midwest Study participants who were still in care at age 19 had received at least one employment and vocational support service since their baseline interview, compared with only 37 percent of their peers who had already exited (Courtney et al., 2005). Moreover, only 37 percent of the young people who received employment or vocational support services between their most recent interview and age 21 did so after leaving care (Courtney et al., 2006).

Two studies involving foster care alumni from Casey Family Programs also collected data on the receipt of employment-related services. Pecora and colleagues (2003) reported that between 75 and 80 percent of the 1,087 alumni they interviewed had received employment-related services while in foster care. Similarly, 84 percent of the 479 alumni interviewed by Pecora and colleagues (2005) reported that, as foster youth, they had had access to employment training or job-location services.

Finally, Singer's (2006) recent study of Utah foster youth used administrative data to look at participation in programs funded through the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA).¹² Foster youth are categorically eligible for WIA-funded youth employment and training services (U.S.

¹² WIA consolidated the year-round training and summer employment programs for youth that had been funded under the Job Training and Partnership Act.

Department of Labor, 2000).¹³ Overall, 18 percent of the young people who aged out of Utah's child welfare system between 1999 and 2003 received WIA-funded services within three years of exiting. Participation in WIA-funded services dramatically increased over time, probably due to a joint effort on the part of the state's Department of Human Services (DHS) and Department of Workforce Services (DWS). Only 5.9 percent of the 1999 to 2002 exit cohorts received WIA-funded services within one year of aging out, compared with 21.5 percent of the 2003 and 2004 exit cohorts.

Although these studies provide some information about the extent to which foster youth are receiving services and supports to prepare them for employment, they have generally not examined whether the receipt of employment-related services and supports is associated with better labor market outcomes. Nevertheless, a number of employment programs that target foster youth have been evaluated.

In FY 2005, the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) awarded Employment Programs and Life Opportunities for Youth (EmPLOY) grants to the five states with the largest foster care populations (California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and Texas) to "develop a set of comprehensive programs to help youth aging out of foster care become employed and self-sufficient." These programs would then serve as models for other WIA-funded programs targeting youth in foster care.¹⁴ Altogether, the five programs, which were implemented in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, and Houston, served more than 1,000 foster youth.¹⁵

An evaluation of these programs involved two site visits, telephone interviews, and an analysis of up to nine quarters of individual participant-level data (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2008b). Outcomes varied considerably across program sites, which could reflect differences in the models that were used. Only one of the sites reported positive outcomes for more than half the participants, and two of the sites reported positive outcomes for less than one-third. However, the longer youth stayed in the program, the better their outcomes. The percentage of youth who became employed ranged from only 8.3 among youth who did not receive job training to 100

¹³ Current or former foster youth can participate in Youth Activities if they are ages 14 to 21, and in Job Corps if they are ages 16 to 24. Former foster youth, ages 18 and older, may also be eligible for WIA-funded adult employment and training services, but priority must be given to public assistance recipients and other low-income adults—populations in which many former foster youth are likely to be included.

¹⁴ DOL awarded each state a total of \$800,000 for FY2005 and FY2006. States were required to provide 100 percent matching funds.

¹⁵ The programs were administered by Foothill Workforce Investment Board in Los Angeles, Alternative Schools Network (ASN) in Chicago, Employment and Training Designs, Inc. in Detroit, Arbor Employment and Training Corporation in New York City, and Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults in Houston.

percent among youth who received job training for 7 to 9 quarters. Both age and education were positively related to employment, but highly confounded.

The researchers also made a number of important observations. First, what youth seemed to value most about the programs was having a caring adult to provide guidance and support. Second, unstable housing, early parenthood, and juvenile records were significant barriers to employment across the five sites. Third, the programs moved away from a highly structured to a more individualized, open-entry/open-exit approach over time. And finally, although collaborative relationships were not established between the programs and the child welfare system, they would need to work together if the youths' needs were to be met.

The only one of the five programs to report positive outcomes for more than half of the participants was the Chicago-based Project New Futures (PNF). PNF is an extension of the Youth Skills Development and Training Program (YSDTP), a collaborative effort between Chicago's Alternative Schools Network (ASN) and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) that helps 16-to 21-year-old foster youth graduate from high school and transition to employment, college, or vocational training. PNF operates in 13 alternative high schools, and youth can enroll beginning in the spring semester of their junior year. The core curriculum focuses on workforce preparation, and PNF provides opportunities for internships, job shadowing, and job placement. Key to the program is intensive staff support. A part-time transition specialist works with youth, both while they are in high school and for at least one year after they graduate. Two-thirds of the 214 PNF participants experienced positive outcomes compared with only 45 percent of the youth from all five sites combined. Forty-four percent earned a high school diploma or the equivalent, one-third began postsecondary education and 56 percent became employed while they were in the program (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2008a).

The 1999 Foster Care Independence Act required the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to conduct an evaluation of selected programs funded through the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to determine whether these programs are helping youth achieve positive outcomes, including higher rates of employment and employment stability. ACF contracted with the Urban Institute, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, and the National Opinion Research Center to conduct the evaluation, and one of the programs being evaluated is the Independent Living-Employment Services Program in Bakersfield, California.

The Bakersfield program, which is administered by the Kern County Department of Human Services (DHS), is a collaboration between the Children's Services Division (child welfare) and the DHS Employment Services Division (public assistance). Two full-time social services workers provide weekly job listings, one-on-one job search counseling, and referrals to other employment preparation and placement services to foster youth and former foster youth aged 16

to 21. A modest clothing allowance is provided to youth to purchase outfits appropriate for interviews.

Researchers visited the site to observe the program, “shadow” program staff, interview program administrators, advocates, and community agency directors, and conduct focus groups with youth, as well as independent living program and other agency staff. Additional program data are being collected, including information about staff contacts with youth, to measure the intensity of the intervention. Baseline interviews in Bakersfield were completed in 2006–2007. First follow-up interviews with each youth were conducted one year after the baseline interview and second follow-ups will be conducted two years post-baseline. Employment is one of the key outcomes being tracked. The results of the study have not yet been released.

The Midwest Study

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (henceforth the “Midwest Study”) is a collaborative effort among the public child welfare agencies in three Midwestern states (Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois), Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington, and the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. Its purpose is to provide states with the first comprehensive picture of foster youth during the transition to adulthood since the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 became law. Planning for this project began in early 2001 when the public child welfare agencies in the three participating states agreed to use some of their federal Chafee funds to examine the outcomes of their foster youth who aged out of care. Chapin Hall and Partners for Our Children are jointly responsible for overseeing the project. The University of Wisconsin Survey Center has collected all of the survey data.

Each state provided Chapin Hall with a current list of 17-year-old foster youth who had entered prior to their 16th birthday and whose primary reason for placement was not delinquency. Youth were excluded from participating in the study if they had a developmental disability or severe mental illness that made it impossible for them to be interviewed, if they were incarcerated or in a psychiatric hospital, if they had run away or were otherwise missing from their placement, or if they were placed out-of-state. Two-thirds of the eligible Illinois youth (494) were randomly selected for inclusion in the study.

Baseline interviews were conducted with 474 of the Illinois youth between May 2002 and March 2003, when they were 17 or 18 years old. This translates into a response rate of 96 percent. Eighty-one percent (386) were re-interviewed at age 19 years. Because Illinois’ juvenile courts allow foster youth to remain under the care and supervision of the state until their twenty-first birthday, nearly two-thirds ($n = 280$) of these 19-year-olds were still in foster care. A third wave of survey data was collected from 77 percent (364) of these young people when they were 21 years old.

Each time they were interviewed, the young people were asked about their experiences across a wide range of domains including education, employment, housing, physical and mental health, criminal justice system involvement, family formation, and preparation for independent living.

This report describes what these young people told us about their current and prior participation in the labor force, including work-related training or services they received. Throughout the report, we make comparisons between the young people who were under the care and supervision of the juvenile court in Cook County (hereafter referred to as the Cook County sample), and the young people who were under the care and supervision of juvenile courts in other counties (hereafter referred to as the Other Counties sample). These comparisons are based on the county that had jurisdiction while the young people had been in foster care, and not necessarily the county in which the young people were living when they were interviewed.

We tested whether any differences we observed were statistically significant. For categorical variables, we used chi-square as our test statistic, and for continuous variables we used a t-statistic. All of the statistical tests were done using a significance level of $p < .05$. Unless otherwise noted, statistically significant differences are indicated by a single asterisk.

Characteristics and Placement Histories of Illinois Foster Youth

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 474 Illinois foster youth who were interviewed at baseline. These young people were predominantly African American and disproportionately female. Upon closer examination, it was primarily Cook County foster youth who identified themselves as African American. A majority of the foster youth from other counties in the state identified themselves as White.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Foster Youth at Baseline

	Total (<i>N</i> = 474)		Cook County (<i>n</i> = 326)		Other Counties (<i>n</i> = 148)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Gender						
Female	256	54.0	175	53.7	81	54.7
Male	218	46.0	151	46.3	67	45.3
Race						
White	97	20.6	17	7.2	80	54.1
African American	329	70.0	279	85.6	50	33.8
Native American	2	0.4	0	-	2	1.4
Multi-racial	42	8.9	27	8.3	15	10.1
Don't Know/Missing	4	0.8	3	0.9	1	0.7
Hispanic Origin						
Hispanic	36	7.6	31	9.5	5	3.4
Non-Hispanic	436	92.0	294	90.2	142	94.9
Don't know/Missing	2	0.4	1	0.3	1	0.7

Experiences in Out-of-Home Care

Table 2 shows what we learned from these young people the first time they were interviewed about their experiences in foster care. Half had had five or more placements, and just over half had run away from a placement at least once, with more than one-third of those who ran away doing so more than once. Nearly two-thirds of these youth were living in a foster home, and about half of those young people were living with kin. Another 20 percent were in some sort of group care setting, although a majority had spent at least some time in group care. Although less than one-third of these youth were currently placed with relatives, two-thirds had ever been in kinship care. Twenty percent of these young people also reported that they had ever re-entered care after being returned home.

The foster care experiences of youth who were under the care and supervision of Cook County were different in several respects from those of youth who were under the care and supervision of other counties in the state. Cook County foster youth were more likely to have had only one or two placements and less likely to have had five or more placements than foster youth in counties other than Cook. Compared with foster youth in Cook County, foster youth in other counties were more likely to have run away from a placement, and more likely to have run away more than once if they ran away, although this difference was not statistically significant. Cook County foster youth were more likely to be placed in a non-relative foster home, less likely to be placed in a relative foster home, and more likely to be placed in a group care setting at the time of their baseline interview than foster youth in other counties. Although about 60 percent of both groups had ever been placed in group care, foster youth in Cook County were significantly more likely to have ever been placed with kin. Finally, youth in other counties were significantly more likely to have re-entered care after being returned home than Cook County foster youth.

Table 2. Experiences in Foster Care

	Total (<i>N</i> = 474)		Cook County (<i>n</i> = 326)		Other Counties (<i>n</i> = 148)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Number of placements						
1 or 2	111	23.4	87	26.9	24	16.2
3 or 4	126	26.7	85	26.2	41	27.7
5 or more	235	49.8	152	46.9	83	56.1
Missing	2	-	2	-	-	-
Ever ran away from care	250	52.9	166	51.1	84	56.8
Ran away from care more than once (if ever ran away)	167	35.2	107	64.5	60	71.4
Placement type at baseline interview						
Non-relative foster home	158	33.4	125	38.5	33	22.3
Relative foster home	145	30.7	82	25.2	63	42.6
Group home or residential care	100	21.1	79	24.3	21	14.2
Independent living	48	10.1	28	8.6	20	13.5
Other	22	4.7	11	3.4	11	7.4
Ever placed in group care	288	60.9	202	62.2	86	58.1
Ever placed with relatives	313	66.2	228	70.2	85	57.4
Ever re-entered care	95	20.1	52	16.0	43	29.1

Finally, we used administrative data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to determine when these young adults had exited foster care.¹⁶ Overall, more than half of these young people remained in foster care until age 21. However, the young people who had been under the care and supervision of the Cook County juvenile court were more than three times as likely to have exited the child welfare system after their 21st birthday as young people who had been under the care and supervision of juvenile courts in other counties. In fact, the young people from Cook County were, on average, more than one year older than their counterparts from elsewhere in the state when they “aged out.”

¹⁶ Some young people were not “officially” discharged until well after their 21st birthday. This was often the case for young people whose placement type was “Youth in College.” For the purpose of this analysis, we treated all of these young people as being discharged when they were 21 years old.

Table 3. Age at Discharge

Age in years	Total (<i>N</i> = 474)		Cook County (<i>n</i> = 326)		Other Counties (<i>n</i> = 148)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
17	19	4.0	11	3.4	8	5.4%
18	68	14.3	15	4.6	53	35.8
19	59	12.4	31	9.5	28	18.9
20	64	13.5	36	11.0	28	18.9
21	264	55.7	233	71.5	31	20.9
Mean Age		20.03		20.43		19.14

Labor Market Experiences

Employment at Baseline

At the time of their baseline interview, when they were 17 and 18 years old, fewer than one-third of these young people reported that they were currently employed. However, more than four-fifths had some prior work experience.

Table 4. Current Employment Status and Prior Work Experience at Baseline: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total <i>N</i> = 474		Cook County <i>n</i> = 326		Other Counties <i>n</i> = 148	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Currently employed	145	30.6	92	28.3	53	35.8
Ever employed	386	81.4	261	80.0	125	84.5
Missing	1	-	1	-	0	-

Young people who were currently employed were working an average of 21 hours per week and earning a mean hourly wage of \$6.36. One-third reported that they obtained their job through a program like Job Corps.

Table 5. Characteristics of Current Job at Baseline: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total <i>N</i> = 145		Cook County <i>n</i> = 92		Other Counties <i>n</i> = 53	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Obtained job through Job Corps or other program	48	33.1	38	41.3	10	18.9
Hours worked per week						
10 or less	33	22.8	21	22.8	12	22.6
11–20 hours	50	34.5	33	35.9	17	32.1
21–30 hours	39	26.9	24	26.1	15	28.3
31–40 hours	20	13.8	11	12.0	9	17.0
Over 40 hours	3	2.1	3	3.3	0	-
Missing	1	-	1	-	0	-
Mean hours worked per week	21.40		21.35		21.09	
Hourly wage						
Less than \$5.15	14	11.0	10	12.7	4	8.3
\$5.15 to \$5.99	42	33.1	23	29.1	19	39.6
\$6.00 to \$6.99	33	26.0	18	22.8	15	31.3
\$7.00 or \$7.99	19	15.0	13	16.5	6	12.5
\$8.00 or more	19	15.0	15	18.9	4	8.3
Missing	18	-	13	-	5	-
Mean hourly wage (\$)	6.36		6.60		5.99	

Young people were not employed but had some prior work experience reported working an average of 27 hours per week and earning a mean hourly wage of \$6.14 at their most recent job. Over one-quarter reported that they obtained their job through a job training program.

Table 6. Characteristics of Most Recent Job at Baseline: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total N = 240		Cook County n = 168		Other Counties n = 72	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Obtained job through Job Corps or other training program	69	28.8	55	33.0	14	19.4
Hours worked per week						
10 or less	21	8.8	14	8.4	7	16.0
11–20 hours	64	26.7	41	24.6	23	32.9
21–30 hours	79	32.9	57	34.1	22	31.4
31–40 hours	58	24.2	45	26.9	13	18.6
Over 40 hours	15	6.3	10	6.0	5	7.1
Missing	3	-	1	-	2	
Mean hours worked per week		27.1		27.6		25.9
Hourly wage						
Less than \$5.15	12	5.7	9	6.2	3	4.7
\$5.15 to \$5.99	92	44.0	61	42.1	31	48.4
\$6.00 to \$6.99	48	23.0	31	21.4	17	26.6
\$7.00 or \$7.99	37	17.7	29	20.0	8	12.5
\$8.00 or more	20	9.6	15	10.3	5	7.8
Missing	31		22		9	
Mean hourly wage (\$)		6.14		6.15		6.11

Young people who were under the care and supervision of Cook County were somewhat less likely to report that they were currently employed and more likely to report that they had never held a job, than young people who were under the care and supervision of other counties in the state. However, these differences were not statistically significant. The two groups worked about the same number of hours per week at both current and most recent jobs, and although the Cook County foster youth tended to earn more for each hour that they worked than foster youth from counties other than Cook, this difference was not statistically significant. Young people who were under the care and supervision of Cook County were also significantly more likely to have obtained their current or most recent job through a job training program than young people who were under the care and supervision of counties other than Cook, possibly reflecting a greater availability of programs in the Chicago area.

Table 7 compares the employment outcomes of foster youth who were in different types of placements at the time of their baseline interview. Foster youth in independent living settings were the least likely to be currently employed, but the most likely to have ever held a job. However, the differences in employment across placement type were not statistically significant.

There was a lot of variation by placement type in hours worked per week and hourly wages paid among the youth who were currently employed. Youth placed in group care tended to work the least number of hours and to be paid the lowest hourly wage, while youth whose placement was independent living tended to work the most number of hours and to be paid the highest hourly wage. However, the differences across placement types were not statistically significant.

There was also variation in hours worked per week and hourly wages paid among the youth who did not have a job but had been employed in the past. Youth placed in non-relative foster homes or in group care tended to work the least number of hours per week and to earn the lowest hourly wage while youth whose placement was independent living tended to work the most number of hours per week and to earn the highest hourly wage. In this case, the difference in hours worked per week between youth whose placement was independent living, on the one hand, and youth placed in non-relative foster homes or in group care, on the other, was statistically significant, although the difference in hourly wages was not.

Table 7. Employment of Foster Youth at Baseline by Placement Type

	Relative Foster Care <i>n</i> = 158		Non-relative Foster Care <i>n</i> =145		Group Care <i>n</i> =100		Independent Living <i>n</i> =48		Other <i>n</i> =22	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Currently employed	50	31.6	50	34.5	29	29.0	9	18.8	7	31.8
Ever employed	123	77.8	120	82.8	79	79.0	45	93.7	18	81.8
Currently employed	<i>n</i> = 50		<i>n</i> = 50		<i>n</i> = 29		<i>n</i> = 9		<i>n</i> = 7	
Mean hours/week	22.4		21.0		17.3		29.0		20.7	
Mean hourly wage	\$6.64		\$6.22		\$5.94		\$7.28		\$6.11	
Employed in past but not currently employed	<i>n</i> = 73		<i>n</i> = 70		<i>n</i> = 50		<i>n</i> = 36		<i>n</i> = 11	
Mean hours per week	27.7		24.9		24.9		32.9		29.9	
Mean hourly wage	\$6.09		\$5.98		\$5.96		\$6.64		\$6.52	

Employment at Age 19

Sixty percent of the young people who were interviewed at age 19 reported working for pay at some point during the past year, but only one third were currently employed. The latter had held their current job for an average of 9.3 months, were working an average of 30 hours per week, and earned a mean hourly wage of \$7.38.

Table 8. Employment at Age 19: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total		Cook County		Other Counties	
	<i>N</i> = 386		<i>n</i> = 261		<i>n</i> = 125	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Ever held a job	350	90.9	231	88.8	119	95.2
Worked at any time during the past year	232	60.1	153	58.6	79	63.2
Currently employed	131	33.9	81	31.0	50	40.0
	<i>N</i> = 131		<i>n</i> = 81		<i>n</i> = 50	
Hours worked per week						
< 20 hours	22	16.8	15	18.5	7	14.0
20 to 39 hours	64	48.9	41	50.6	23	46.0
40 hours	39	29.8	22	27.2	17	34.0
> 40 hours	6	4.6	3	3.7	3	6.0
Mean hours worked per week		30.3		29.3		31.9
Hourly wage						
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Less than \$5.15	2	1.7	1	1.4	1	2.2
\$5.15 to \$5.99	14	12.2	9	13.0	5	10.9
\$6.00 to \$6.99	36	31.3	18	26.1	18	39.1
\$7.00 to \$7.99	31	27.0	21	30.4	10	21.7
\$8.00 or more	32	27.8	20	28.9	12	26.0
Missing	16	-	12	-	4	-
Mean hourly wage		\$7.38		\$7.48		\$7.23
Months at current job						
< 3 months	56	43.1	34	42.5	22	44.0
3 to 6 months	20	15.4	13	16.3	7	14.0
6 to 12 months	19	14.6	11	13.8	8	16.0
12 to 24 months	21	16.2	13	16.3	8	16.0
> 24 months	14	10.8	9	11.3	5	6.0
Missing	1		1		0	
Mean months at current job		9.3		9.8		8.5

Young people from counties other than Cook were significantly more likely than young people from Cook County to have ever worked for pay. Although the former were also more likely to be currently employed, this difference was not statistically significant. On average, the two groups worked approximately the same number of hours per week and earned approximately the same

hourly wage. Young people from Cook County had, on average, held their current job for more than a month longer, but this difference was not statistically significant.

One explanation for why young people from Cook County were less likely to be employed than young people from elsewhere in the state is that the former were much more likely to still be in care at age 19. Hence, they may have perceived less of a need to have a job.

Table 9. Care Status at Age 19: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total		Cook County		Other Counties	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Still in foster care at age 19	280	72.5	227	87.0	53	42.4
No longer in foster care at age 19	106	27.5	34	13.0	72	57.6

Nearly all of the young people who were not employed at age 19 reported that they were able to work and most reported wanting a job. Sixty percent of those who were able to work had taken steps to find employment during the past month. Among the most common sets were sending out resumes or completing job applications, soliciting help from friends, and contacting employers.

There were no differences between the young people from Cook County and the young people from counties other than Cook with respect to their employability. Although young people from Cook County who were able to work were somewhat more likely to report that they wanted to work and that they had been engaged in job search activities during the past month than young people from other counties, neither of these differences was statistically significant.

Table 10. Employability and Job Search Activities at Age 19: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total <i>N</i> = 255		Cook County <i>n</i> = 180		Other Counties <i>n</i> = 75	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Ability to work (if not employed)						
Able to work	232	91.0	164	90.1	68	90.7
Not able to work due to a disability	5	2.0	3	1.7	2	2.7
Not able to work due to another reason	1	0.4	0	0	1	1.3
Not able to work due to incarceration	17	6.7	13	7.2	4	5.3
Wants to work (if able to work and not employed)	210	82.4	152	84.4	58	77.3
Any job search during the past month (if able to work)	136	58.6	99	60.4	37	54.4
Contacted employers or had a job interview	69	50.7	45	45.4	24	64.8
Contacted employment agency	44	32.3	30	30.3	14	37.8
Solicited help from friends or family	82	60.3	60	60.6	22	59.4
Contacted school employment center	30	22.0	25	25.2	5	13.5
Sent out resumes or completed job applications	102	75.0	76	76.7	26	70.2
Searched through help-wanted ads	92	63.9	63	60.0	29	74.4
Responded to help-wanted ads	51	35.4	32	30.5	19	48.7
Attended job training	27	19.8	22	22.2	5	15.7

Employment at Age 21

By age 21, nearly all of these young adults had some prior work experience, and most reported having worked at some point during the past year. However, less than half were currently employed. Those who were currently employed had held their job for an average of 10.2 months, were working an average of 34.4 hours per week, and were earning a mean hourly wage of \$8.53.

Young people from Cook County were less likely to be employed or to have worked during the past year than young people from counties other than Cook. However, these differences were not statistically significant. There was relatively little difference between the two groups in the mean number of hours worked per week among those who were employed. Moreover, although the young people from Cook County tended to have a higher hourly wage and to have held the jobs longer than young people from other counties, these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 11. Employment at Age 21: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total		Cook County		Other Counties	
	N = 364		n = 241		n = 123	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Ever held a job	345	94.8	226	93.8	119	96.7
Worked at any time during the past year	295	85.5	179	79.2	116	97.4
Currently employed	172	47.3	105	46.1	67	58.3
	N = 172		n = 105		n = 67	
Hours worked per week						
< 20 hours	13	7.6	9	8.7	4	6.1
20 to 39 hours	77	45.3	48	46.2	29	43.9
40 hours	59	34.7	35	33.7	24	36.4
> 40 hours	21	12.4	12	11.5	9	13.6
Missing	2	-	1	-	1	-
Mean hours per week	34.4		33.7		35.4	
Hourly wage						
Less than \$5.15	1	0.7	1	1.1	0	-
\$5.15 to \$5.99	3	2.1	2	2.2	1	1.8
\$6.00 to \$6.99	24	16.6	10	11.2	14	25.0
\$7.00 to \$7.99	41	28.3	24	27.0	17	30.4
\$8.00 to \$8.99	29	20.0	19	21.3	10	17.9
\$9.00 to \$9.99	16	11.0	10	11.2	6	10.7
\$10.00 to \$10.99	15	10.3	10	11.2	5	8.9
\$11.00 to \$11.99	3	2.1	3	3.4	0	-
\$12.00 or more	13	9.0	10	11.2	3	5.4
Missing ^a	28	-	17		11	-
Mean hourly wage	\$8.53		\$8.81		\$8.09	
Months at current job						
< 3 months	55	33.1	28	28.0	27	40.9
3 to 6 months	27	16.3	20	20.0	7	10.6
6 to 12 months	38	22.9	24	24.0	14	21.2
12 to 24 months	24	14.5	11	11.0	13	19.7
> 24 months	22	13.3	17	17.0	5	7.6
Missing	6		5		1	
Mean months at current job	10.2		11.2		8.8	

^aData were missing for 23 respondents who were not paid by the hour, and 5 respondents who answered “do not know” when asked about their hourly wage.

Seventy percent of the young people who were not employed at age 21 reported that they were able to work. Another 15 percent could not work because they were incarcerated. Almost all of those who were able to work reported wanting to work, and most reported taking steps to become employed during the past month. This was true regardless of whether the young people were from

Cook County or other counties in the state. The most common steps taken were sending out resumes and completing job applications, responding to help wanted ads and contacting employers.

Table 12. Employability and Job Search Activities at Age 21

	Total		Cook County		Other Counties	
	<i>N</i> = 192		<i>n</i> = 136		<i>n</i> = 56	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Ability to work (if not employed)						
Able to work	133	69.6	96	71.1	37	66.1
Not able to work due to a disability	15	7.9	10	7.4	5	8.9
Not able to work due to another reason	15	7.9	10	7.4	5	8.9
Not able to work due to incarceration	28	14.6	19	14.1	9	16.1
Wants to work (if able to work and not employed)	127	95.5	92	95.8	35	95.8
Any job search during the past month (if able to work)	107	84.3	78	84.8	29	82.9
Contacted employers or had	81	75.0	59	75.6	22	75.9
Contacted employment agency	45	41.7	34	43.6	11	37.9
Solicited help from friends or family	76	70.4	59	75.6	17	58.6
Contacted school employment center	27	25.0	22	28.2	5	17.2
Sent out resumes	51	47.2	42	53.8	9	31.0
Completed job applications	103	95.4	74	94.9	29	100.0
Searched or responded to help-wanted ads	79	73.1	57	73.1	22	75.9
Had a job interview	48	44.4	33	42.3	15	51.7
Attended job training	15	13.9	13	16.7	2	6.9

Yet another indicator of their how difficult it is for these young people not only to find, but also to keep, a job is the number of waves of data collection at which they reported being employed. Of the 267 young people who were interviewed at all three waves, only 13.5 percent had a job each time they were interviewed, compared with 30 percent who were never working when the data were collected. Although the young people from Cook County were somewhat more likely to have been jobless at all three waves than the young people from other counties, the distributions were not significantly different.

Table 13. Employment Stability: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total (<i>N</i> = 474)		Cook County (<i>n</i> = 326)		Other Counties (<i>n</i> = 148)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Employed at all three waves	36	13.5	21	12.4	15	15.2
Employed at two waves	73	27.3	40	23.7	33	33.3
Employed at one wave	77	28.8	50	29.6	28	28.3
Employed at zero waves	81	30.3	58	34.3	23	23.2
Missing	1					

School–Work Tradeoff

One possible explanation for why so many of these young people were not employed at any given point in time is that they were enrolled in school. Although 90 percent of the young people who were not working at age 17 or 18 were enrolled in school, school enrollment was even higher among young people who were employed. Moreover, despite a large decline in school enrollment among both groups, the pattern was the same at ages 19 and 21. Young people who were working were, if anything, more likely to be enrolled in school.

This relationship between school enrollment and employment did vary by geographic region, although not in a consistent way. At ages 17 or 18, the difference in school enrollment between young people who were working and those who were not was larger among young people from counties other than Cook than among young people from Cook County. By contrast, young people from Cook County accounted for all of the difference in school enrollment between those who were working and those who were not at age 19, and at age 21, young people who were working were almost twice as likely to be enrolled in school as young people who were not, regardless of the county which they were from.

Table 14. Current School Enrollment by Current Employment Status

	Employment Status					
	Employed		Not employed		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Age 17 or 18						
Total	139	95.9	294	89.6	433	91.5
Cook County	89	96.7	212	91.0	301	92.6
Other Counties	50	94.3	82	86.3	132	89.2
Age 19						
Total	78	59.5	138	54.1	216	56.0
Cook County	58	71.6	107	59.4	165	63.2
Other Counties	20	40.0	31	41.3	51	40.8
Age 21						
Total	55	32.0	36	18.9	91	25.1
Cook County	39	37.1	29	21.6	68	28.5
Other Counties	16	23.9	7	12.5	23	18.7

Finally, it also worth noting that, at all three waves of data collection, young people from Cook County were more likely to be enrolled in school than young people from other counties, particularly at ages 19 and 21. This probably reflects a combination of factors, including the number of educational opportunities available to young people in urban versus non-urban settings, as well as the greater tendency of Cook County foster youth to remain in care until their 21st birthday.

Preparation for Employment

At all three waves of data collection, the young people were asked about their receipt of specific employment and vocational support services. At the time of their baseline interview, when they were 17 or 18 years old, 63 percent reported that they had received at least one employment or vocational support, with the mean number of supports they had received being 2.8. The three most commonly reported supports were help completing job applications, help with interviewing skills, and help securing a work permit or Social Security card.

Although the percentage of young people who received at least one employment or vocational support was about the same, regardless of whether they were from Cook County or from other counties in the state, Cook County foster youth received a greater number of employment or vocational supports on average than foster youth from counties other than Cook. However, this difference was not statistically significant. Very few of these young people were currently enrolled in a vocational training program, and this was true regardless of the county they were from.

Table 15. Receipt of Employment or Vocational Support Services Prior to Baseline: Cook County Foster Youth Compared with Foster Youth from Other Counties

	Total N=474		Cook County n=326		Other Counties n=148	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Received any employment or vocational supports	299	63.1	204	62.6	95	64.2
Participated in resume-writing workshop	84	17.7	64	19.8	20	13.7
Received assistance identifying potential employers	87	18.4	56	17.2	31	20.9
Received help completing job applications	195	41.1	134	41.2	61	41.2
Received help with interviewing skills	176	37.1	120	37.0	56	38.1
Received help with job referrals or placement	118	24.9	87	26.9	31	20.9
Received help using career resource library	77	16.2	63	19.4	14	9.5
Received an explanation of benefits coverage	72	15.2	50	15.4	22	15.0
Received help securing work permit or Social Security card	168	35.4	119	36.8	49	33.8
Received an explanation of workplace values	135	28.5	97	29.8	38	26.0
Secured an internship	45	9.5	34	10.5	11	7.4
Participated in a summer employment program	147	31.0	121	37.2	26	17.6
Mean number of supports received		2.8		3.3		2.7
Mean number of supports received if received at least one		4.4		4.6		3.8
Currently enrolled in vocational training program	11	3.2	9	2.9	2	1.5

Table 14 compares receipt of employment and vocational supports by placement type at baseline. Youth placed in group care were significantly more likely to have received at least one employment or vocational support service than youth placed in relative foster care. Compared with youth in relative foster care, youth placed in group care also received, on average, significantly more of those employment or vocational support services.

Table 16. Receipt of Employment or Vocational Supports Prior to Baseline by Placement Type

	Relative Foster Care <i>n</i> =158		Non-relative Foster Care <i>n</i> =145		Group Care <i>n</i> =100		Independent Living <i>n</i> =48		Other <i>n</i> =22	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Received any employment or vocational supports	87	55.1	297	66.9	73	73.0	28	58.3	14	63.6
Mean number of supports received	2.3		2.7		3.8		2.5		2.5	
Mean number of supports received if received at least one	4.1		4.1		5.1		4.3		3.9	

At age 19, 43 percent of these young people reported that they had received at least one employment or vocational support since their baseline interview, and the average number of supports they had received was approximately two. The most common supports were help completing job applications, help developing interview skills, and help with job referrals. Over 80 percent of the young people who received at least one support found those supports to be at least somewhat helpful, including nearly one-third who found them to be very helpful. Just over half of those who received at least one support reported feeling very prepared to meet their employment goals, and most of the others reported feeling somewhat prepared.

Young people from Cook County were more likely to have received at least one employment or vocational support, and received more supports, on average, than their peers in other counties, but only the latter difference was statistically significant. Young people from Cook County who received at least one employment or vocational support were also more likely than their peers in other counties to perceive those supports as very helpful and to perceive themselves as very prepared to meet their employment goals.¹⁷

Just under 10 percent of these young people were enrolled in a vocational training program when they were interviewed at age 19, regardless of whether they were from Cook County or a county other than Cook.

¹⁷ Due to an error in the survey instrument, young people were only asked about their preparedness if they reported receiving at least one employment or vocational support.

Table 17. Receipt of Employment and Vocational Supports at Age 19: Young People from Cook County Compared with Young People from Other Counties

	Total		Cook County		Other Counties	
	<i>N</i> = 386		<i>n</i> = 261		<i>n</i> = 125	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Received at least one employment or vocational support	166	43.0	128	49.0	38	30.4
Received vocational counseling	68	17.8	56	21.5	12	9.8
Participated in a resume-writing workshop	70	18.9	62	23.8	8	6.4
Received assistance identifying potential employers	64	16.6	55	21.2	9	7.2
Received help completing job applications	110	28.6	84	32.3	26	20.8
Received help with interviewing skills	103	26.8	84	32.3	19	15.2
Received help with job referrals or placement	86	22.3	79	27.7	14	11.2
Received help using career resource library	45	11.7	36	13.8	9	7.2
Received an explanation of benefits coverage	53	13.8	45	17.4	8	6.5
Received help securing work permit or Social Security card	72	18.8	53	20.4	19	15.3
Received an explanation of workplace values	76	19.7	59	22.7	17	13.6
Secured an internship	28	7.3	25	9.6	3	2.4
Participated in summer employment program	73	18.9	67	25.7	6	4.8
Mean number of supports received		2.2		2.7		1.2
Mean number of supports received if received at least one		5.1		5.4		3.0
Helpfulness of employment and vocational supports (if received at least one)						
Very helpful	52	31.3	43	33.6	9	23.7
Somewhat helpful	83	50.0	58	45.3	25	65.2
Not very helpful	16	9.6	14	10.9	2	5.3
Not at all helpful	15	9.0	13	10.2	3	5.3
Preparedness for employment (if received at least one employment or vocational support)						
Very prepared	87	53.0	71	56.3	16	42.1
Somewhat prepared	69	42.1	49	38.9	20	52.6
Not very prepared	6	3.7	4	3.2	2	5.3
Not at all prepared	2	1.2	2	1.6	0	-
Currently enrolled in a job training program	35	9.1	23	8.8	12	9.6

At age 21, 30 percent of young people reported that they had received at least one employment or vocational support since their most recent interview, and the mean number of supports they had received was 1.6. The three supports most likely to be reported were help with interview skills, help with job applications, and explanations of workplace values. Eighty percent of the young people who received at least one employment or vocational support perceived those supports as at least somewhat helpful, including 43 percent who perceived them as very helpful. Regardless of whether they received any employment or vocational supports, 47 percent of these 21-year-olds reported feeling very prepared to meet their employment goals and another 43 percent reported feeling somewhat prepared.

Young people from Cook County were significantly more likely to have received at least one employment or vocational support than young people from other counties. Although they also tended to receive more employment or vocational supports, on average, this difference was not statistically significant. Among the young people who received at least employment or vocational support, those from Cook County were somewhat more likely to perceive those supports as very helpful than young people from counties other than Cook. Young people from Cook County were also somewhat more likely to perceive themselves as very prepared to meet their employment goals and somewhat less likely to perceive themselves as only somewhat prepared regardless of whether they received any employment or vocational supports.

More than one-third of these young people were either currently enrolled in a vocational training program or had been enrolled in a vocational training program since their last interview. However, less than half of those who had been enrolled had received a certificate of completion. Young people from Cook County were more likely to report that they were currently enrolled in a vocational training program or had been enrolled since their last interview, than young people from other counties in the state, but this difference was not statistically significant. Moreover, there was little difference between the two groups in likelihood of having received a certificate of completion if they had been enrolled in a program.

Table 18. Receipt of Employment and Vocational Supports at Age 21: Young People from Cook County Compared with Young People from Other Counties

	Total		Cook County		Other Counties	
	<i>N</i> = 364		<i>n</i> = 241		<i>n</i> = 123	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Received at least one employment or vocational support since last interview	109	29.9	82	34.0	27	22.0
Received vocational counseling	47	12.9	40	16.6	7	5.7
Participated in a resume-writing workshop	49	13.5	43	17.8	6	4.9
Received assistance identifying potential employers	56	15.4	49	20.3	7	5.7
Received help completing job applications	74	20.3	57	23.7	17	13.8
Received help with interviewing skills	82	22.5	64	26.6	18	14.6
Received help with job referrals or placement	53	14.6	43	17.8	10	8.1
Received help using career resource library	31	8.5	27	11.2	3	2.4
Received an explanation of benefits coverage	42	11.5	31	12.9	11	8.9
Received help securing work permit or Social Security card	41	11.3	29	12.0	12	9.8
Received an explanation of workplace values	64	17.6	52	21.6	12	9.8
Secured an internship	20	4.2	17	7.1	4	3.3
Participated in summer employment program	33	9.1	28	11.6	5	4.1
Mean number of supports received since last interview		1.6		2.0		0.8
Mean number of supports (if received at least one)		5.4		5.8		4.0
Helpfulness of employment or vocational supports (if received at least one)						
Very helpful	40	36.7	29	35.4	11	40.7
Somewhat helpful	47	43.1	35	42.7	12	44.4
Not very helpful	13	20.2	10	12.2	3	11.1
Not at all helpful	9	8.3	8	9.8	1	3.7
Preparedness for employment						
Very prepared	170	47.0	119	49.4	51	42.1
Somewhat prepared	157	43.4	101	41.4	56	46.3
Not very prepared	22	9.7	12	5.0	10	8.3
Not at all prepared	13	3.6	9	3.7	4	3.3
Currently enrolled in a job training program	30	8.2	23	9.5	7	5.7
Ever enrolled in a job training program since last interview, but not currently enrolled	99	29.6	71	32.6	28	24.1
Obtained certificate or license (if currently enrolled or enrolled since last interview)	55	42.6	41	43.6	14	40.0

Discussion

Consistent with what we know from previous studies about the employment outcomes of former foster youth, our findings indicate that far too many of the young people who age out of care in Illinois fare poorly in the labor market during their transition to adulthood. Although the proportion of young people who were currently employed increased as they grew older, from less than one third at baseline, when they were 17 or 18 years old, to nearly one half at age 21, a majority were not working at a given point in time. In fact, only 13.5 percent had a job at all three waves.

It's not that these young people had no work experience. On the contrary, more than 80 percent had ever held a job at baseline, and nearly all had ever held a job by age 21. This suggests that staying employed may be as difficult as, if not more difficult than, getting hired. The difficulty these young people had maintaining stable employment was also reflected in the length of time they had held their current job if they were working. A majority those who were employed at age 19, and nearly half of those who were employed at age 21, had been working at their current job for six months or less.

Not only was the percentage of young people who were working greater than the percentage who were not, but in addition, most of those who were employed were not working at a job that paid a living wage. This may not have been a problem as long as these young people were still in foster care. However, and despite an increase over time in the mean hourly wage, they were only earning, on average, \$8.53 per hour at age 21. Even if they were working 40 hours per week—and for the most part they were not—their weekly paycheck before taxes and other deductions would be just \$341, or less than \$18,000 annually.

Although many of these young people were still enrolled in school, particularly at the first two waves of data collection, school enrollment did not appear to account for the low rates of employment we observed. If anything, the young people who were working were more likely to be enrolled in school than their peers who were not employed.

The Foster Care Independence Act specifically mentions employment-related services and supports as being among the types of assistance that states should use their Chafee funding to provide. At baseline, when these young people were age 17 or 18, 63 percent reported having received at least one service or support to help prepare them for employment. Of course, this means that more than one-third had received none. Moreover, only three of the dozen or so employment-related services or supports about which these young people were asked were reported as having been received by at least one third.

Unfortunately, the percentage of young people who reported receiving services or supports to prepare them for employment fell over time. Only 43 percent reported receiving any employment-related services or supports between their baseline interview and their interview at age 19, and only 30 percent reported receiving any employment related services or supports between their interviews at age 19 and age 21.

At both ages 19 and 21, more than 80 of the young people who received any employment or vocational supports perceived those supports as at least somewhat helpful. Even more interestingly, given their outcomes at age 21, 90 percent felt at least somewhat prepared to meet their employment goals, including nearly half who perceived themselves as very prepared.

There was some geographic variation in labor force participation as well as in the receipt of employment-related services and supports. Young people from Cook County were consistently less likely to be employed than their counterparts from counties other than Cook. At least two factors may have contributed to this difference. First, because young people from Cook County are more likely to remain in foster care until age 21, they may simply have felt less of a need to work at age 19. Second, although one might expect to find more opportunities for employment in a large urban area like Cook County, a much higher proportion of the young people from Cook County were African American, and in Illinois, the unemployment rate among young adults who are African American is considerably higher than the unemployment rate among young adults who are White. For example, in 2004, when these young people were 19 years old, 40.8 percent of 16- to 19-year-old African Americans were unemployed compared with 14.7 percent of 16- to 19-year-old Whites (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004).

Although they were less likely to be working than their peers from counties outside of Cook, young people from Cook County were significantly more likely to report receiving at least one employment-related service or support. However, the difference was only statistically significant at age 21. Young people from Cook County also tended to receive more of those employment or vocational supports.

Labor force participation and the receipt of employment-related services and supports also varied by placement type, although not always in predictable ways. In particular, and contrary to what might have been expected, foster youth whose placement was independent living were the least likely to be currently employed. However, they were the most likely to have ever held a job. The

reason for this seeming contradiction is not clear. It is also worth noting that although foster youth in group care were the most likely to have received employment or vocational support services, and tended to have received more of those support services, on average, than foster youth in other placement settings, they were among the least likely to be employed or to have ever held a job. This could reflect the fact that group care is, by definition, more restrictive, and hence, provides fewer opportunities for foster youth to work in the community.

Overall, our findings point to an unmet need for employment training and job placement programs that target foster youth. Given the state of the economy, including the growing rate of unemployment, young people aging out of foster care will be entering a labor market in which it will be increasingly difficult for those who lack job skills or work experience to earn a living wage. Thus, the need for such programs may be greater now than it ever was before.

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Established in 1985, Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities.

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