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**Midwest Evaluation of  
the Adult Functioning of  
Former Foster Youth:  
Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24**

**Executive Summary**

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# Introduction

For most young people, the transition to adulthood is a gradual process (Furstenberg, Rumbaut & Settersten, 2005). Many continue to receive financial and emotional support from their parents or other family members well past age 18. This is in stark contrast to the situation confronting youth in foster care. Too old for the child welfare system but often unprepared to live as independent young adults, the approximately 29,500 foster youth who “age out” of care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009) are expected to make it on their own long before the vast majority of their peers.

The federal government has recognized the need to help prepare foster youth for this transition to adulthood since Title IV-E of the Social Security Act was amended in 1986 to create the Independent Living Program. Federal support for foster youth making the transition to adulthood was enhanced in 1999 with the creation of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. More recently, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 amended Title IV-E to extend the age of Title IV-E eligibility from 18 to 21.

This change in federal policy was informed by findings from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (the Midwest Study), the largest longitudinal study of young people aging out of foster care and transitioning to adulthood since the passage of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act in 1999.

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## **The Midwest Study: Background and Overview**

The Midwest Study is a collaborative effort among the public child welfare agencies in the three participating states (Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin), 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 view of how former foster youth are faring as they transition to adulthood since the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 became law.

Baseline interviews were conducted with 732 foster youth (63 from Iowa, 474 from Illinois, and 195 from Wisconsin) between May 2002 and March 2003 who were either 17 or 18 years old. Eighty-two percent ( $n = 603$ ) of these young people were re-interviewed between March and December 2004 when most were 19 years old and 81 percent ( $n = 590$ ) were re-interviewed between March 2006 and January 2007 when nearly all were age 21. A fourth wave of survey data collected from 82 percent ( $n = 602$ ) of the baseline sample between July 2008 and April 2009 when study participants were 23 or 24 years old.

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# Findings from Wave 4 of the Midwest Study

This Executive Summary highlights the major findings from that fourth wave of survey data. It summarizes what we learned about the experiences of these young people across a variety of domains at age 23 or 24. Where relevant, we make comparisons between our sample of young adults who aged out of foster care and a nationally representative sample of 23- and 24-year-olds who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (henceforth referred to as the “Add Health Study”).<sup>1</sup>

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## Demographic Characteristics and Time since Discharge from Care

Females comprised 54 percent of the sample and more than two-thirds of these young adults identified themselves as non-white, primarily African American. No statistically significant differences in demographic characteristics between the young adults who were interviewed at wave 4 and the full baseline sample were found.

On average these young adults had been “out of care” for 4 years when they completed the wave 4 interview. However, this varied considerably by state, with young adults from Illinois having been out of care for significantly fewer years (mean = 3.2) than young adults from either Iowa (mean = 5.0) or Wisconsin (mean = 5.3). This difference reflects the fact that Illinois is one of the few states where young

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<sup>1</sup> The Add Health Study is directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and funded by grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgment is due Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (<http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth>). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.

people can and routinely do remain in foster care until their 21st birthday, whereas foster youth in Iowa and Wisconsin typically age out around the time they turn 18.

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## **Living Arrangements**

At the time of their wave 4 interview, 49 percent of the young adults in the Midwest Study were living in their “own place,” and 21 percent were living with their biological parents or other relatives. Sixteen percent of the male study participants were incarcerated.

Since exiting foster care, over two-thirds of the young adults in the Midwest Study had lived in at least three different places, including 30 percent who had lived in five or more places. Even more concerning, 24 percent of these young adults had ever been homeless, 28 percent had ever couch surfed, and 37 percent had ever been homeless or couch surfed since exiting foster care.<sup>2</sup> One-half of the young people who had been homeless had been homeless more than once. Repeated episodes of couch surfing were even more common, with two-thirds of the young people who had couch surfed having done so on more than one occasion.

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## **Relationships with Family of Origin and Social Support**

Despite having been removed from home and placed in foster care, almost all of the Midwest Study participants had maintained family ties and, in many cases, those ties were quite strong. Seventy-nine percent reported feeling *very close*, and another 15 percent reported feeling *somewhat close*, to at least one biological family member. Likewise 81 percent of these young adults reported having contact with a biological family member at least once a week. In addition, between one-half and two-thirds reported that they had enough people in their social support network to whom they could turn for help with different types of needs

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## **Foster Care Experiences and Preparation for Independent Living**

Looking back, almost two-thirds of the Midwest Study participants agreed that they were lucky to have been placed in foster care, and well over half reported feeling satisfied with their experience while in the child welfare system. Almost three-quarters agreed that they were helped by their foster caregivers and almost two-thirds agreed that they were helped by their social worker. Although only one-quarter of these young people reported that they felt very prepared to be self-sufficient when they exited foster care,

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<sup>2</sup> Being homeless was defined as “sleeping in a place where people weren’t meant to sleep, or sleeping in a homeless shelter, or not having a regular residence in which to sleep” and couch-surfing was defined as “moving from one temporary housing arrangement provided by friends, family or strangers to another.”

two-thirds reported that they felt very prepared to be self-sufficient at age 23 or 24. More than one-third of these young people reported that there was some training or assistance they wished they had received, but did not receive, while in foster care. Most commonly, they expressed a general need for training in independent living skills, especially budgeting and money management. Many also expressed a need for assistance with employment and housing.

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## Education

Our data suggest that the educational deficits with which foster youth approach the transition to adulthood persist into their early adult years and that they continue to lag behind their peers in the general population. By age 23 or 24, nearly one-quarter of the young adults in the Midwest Study did not have a high school diploma or a GED, and only 6 percent had a 2- or 4-year degree, although nearly one-third had completed at least one year of college. Compared to their Add Health Study counterparts, Midwest Study participants were over three times as likely *not* to have a high school diploma or GED, half as likely to have completed any college, and one-fifth as likely to have a college degree. They were also less likely to be enrolled in school, less likely to be pursuing postsecondary education if they were enrolled, and more likely to be enrolled in a 2-year college rather than 4-year college or graduate school if they were pursuing postsecondary education.

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## Employment and Earnings

Although 84 percent of the Midwest Study participants reported that they had ever held a job since leaving foster care, only 48 percent were currently employed, or 52 percent if the 45 young men who were currently incarcerated are excluded. This is significantly lower than the 76 percent of Add Health Study participants who currently had a job. Midwest Study participants who were employed reported working a mean of 37 and a median of 40 hours per week as well as mean and median hourly wages of \$10.14 and \$9.45, respectively. Their Add Health Study counterparts worked an average of 3 hours more per week for almost \$4 more per hour.

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## Income and Assets

Almost three-quarters of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported any income from employment during the past year, but their median earnings were just \$8,000. By comparison, 92 percent of their peers in the Add Health Study had any income from employment and their median earnings were \$18,300. Many of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported income from other sources, especially family and friends. Nearly three-quarters of those who were married or cohabiting had income from their spouse's or partner's employment, but only 17 percent of those who were living with their children but not their children's other parent had received any child support. Fewer than half of the Midwest Study



participants had something as basic as a checking or savings account compared with 85 percent of their Add Health Study peers.

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## **Economic Hardships**

As another indicator of their precarious economic situation, almost half of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported experiencing at least one of five material hardships (i.e., not enough money to pay rent, not enough money to pay a utility bill, gas or electricity shut off, phone service disconnected, or evicted) during the past year compared with fewer than one-quarter of their Add Health Study peers. In addition, nearly 29 percent of these young adults would be categorized as having low or very low food security.

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## **Receipt of Government Benefits**

During the past year, three-quarters of the young women, including 89 percent of custodial mothers, and one-third of the young men in the Midwest Study had received benefits from one or more need-based government programs. A similar gender difference was also found in current benefit receipt. Seventy percent of the young women, including 85 percent of custodial mothers and 29 percent of the young men, were currently receiving benefits from one or more need-based government programs.

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## **Access to Health Care Services**

Fifty-seven percent of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported that they currently had health insurance compared with 78 percent of their Add Health counterparts. Moreover, although two-thirds of the Midwest Study participants who were insured were covered by Medicaid or S-CHIP, 73 percent of their Add Health Study counterparts were covered by insurance provided by their employer or their parents' insurance.

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## **Pregnancy**

More than three-quarters of the young women in the Midwest Study had ever been pregnant (compared with only 40 percent of their Add Health Study counterparts), two-thirds had been pregnant since leaving foster care, and two-thirds of those who had ever been pregnant had been pregnant more than once (compared with just over half of their Add Health Study counterparts). Almost two-thirds of the young women who had ever been pregnant indicated that their most recent pregnancy had been unplanned.

Sixty-one percent of the young men in the Midwest Study reported that they had ever impregnated a female partner compared with 28 percent of their Add Health Study counterparts, and 55 percent of the

young men who had ever impregnated a female partner indicated that the most recent pregnancy had been unplanned.

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## **Marriage, Cohabitation, and Relationships**

Forty percent of the young women and one-third of the young men in the Midwest Study were either married or cohabiting (i.e., living with a partner in a marriage-like relationship). Midwest Study participants were more likely to be cohabiting and less likely to be married than their Add Health Study counterparts. Half of the young women and 45 percent of the young men in the Midwest Study who were neither married nor cohabiting were involved in a relationship, and in most of those cases they were dating one partner exclusively.

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## **Parenthood**

Two-thirds of the young women and almost half of the young men in the Midwest Study reported that they had at least one child. Nearly all of the mothers but less than half of the fathers reported that one or more of their children was living with them. By contrast, over 60 percent of the fathers reported that one or more of their children was living somewhere else, primarily with the other parent, compared with only 17 percent of the mothers. Although those parents who were living with one or more of their biological children were generally not experiencing high levels of parenting stress, most acknowledged that being a parent was harder than they had expected.

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## **Illegal Behavior and Criminal Justice System Involvement**

Young men in the Midwest Study were more likely than young women to report that they had engaged in a variety of illegal behaviors during the 12 months prior to their interview. There were few differences in self-reported illegal behavior between the former foster youth and their Add Health Study counterparts. Midwest Study participants, especially the young men, reported a high level of involvement with the criminal justice system since their most recent interview. Forty-two percent of the young men compared with 20 percent of the young women reported that they had been arrested, 23 percent of the young men compared with 8 percent of the young women reported that they had been convicted of a crime, and 45 percent compared with 18 percent of the young women reported that they had been incarcerated.

Midwest Study participants also reported much higher cumulative levels of criminal justice system involvement than their Add Health counterparts. In fact, cumulative levels of criminal justice system involvement were higher among the young women in the Midwest Study than among the young men in the Add Health Study.

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## **Victimization**

Young men in the Midwest Study were more than twice as likely as young women to report that they had been the victim of a violent crime during the past 12 months, and Midwest Study participants were more likely to have been the victim of a violent crime during the past 12 months than their Add Health Study counterparts regardless of gender. Although only a small percentage of Midwest Study participants reported experiencing any type of sexual victimization since their last interview, young women were more than twice as likely to do so as young men.

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## **Life Satisfaction and Future Orientation**

Two-thirds of the young adults in the Midwest Study reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their lives as a whole, more than half reported that lives have been better or much better since they exited foster care, and most reported feeling fairly to very optimistic about their futures. Although they also expressed a fair amount of optimism about their prospects for the future, they were consistently less optimistic about their prospects for the future than their Add Health Study counterparts.

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## **Connectedness**

Finally, youth aging out of foster care have been identified as being at high risk of becoming disconnected young adults—that is, young adults who are neither working nor enrolled in school (Levin-Epstein & Greenberg, 2003; Wald & Martinez, 2003; Youth Transition Funders Group, 2004). Sixty percent of the young women and 58 percent of the young men were connected (i.e., working or enrolled in school) at age 23 or 24. Expanding our definition of connectedness to include custodial parents increases those percentages to 87 percent and 63 percent, respectively.

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## **Trends over Time**

We have been tracking the outcomes of the Midwest Study participants since they were 17 or 18 years old. As they move into their mid-twenties, we can begin to identify trends in the directions that their lives have taken across different domains including educational attainment and school enrollment, current employment, family formation, criminal justice involvement, and connectedness. A complete discussion of these trends can be found in the full report.

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# Discussion and Next Steps

We began following this sample of young adults when they were just 17 or 18 years old and still in foster care, and wanted to know what would happen as they transitioned into adulthood. Would they become economically self-sufficient or struggle to support themselves? Would they be able to overcome the challenges often faced by former foster youth? And how would their outcomes compare to those of their peers who had never been in foster care?

The picture that emerges from data we collected when they were 23 and 24 years old is disquieting, particularly if we measure their success in terms of self-sufficiency. Across a wide range of outcome measures, including postsecondary educational attainment, employment, housing stability, public assistance receipt, and criminal justice system involvement, these former foster youth are faring poorly as a group both in an absolute sense and relative to young adults in the general population.

Although a majority of the young adults in the Midwest Study had a high school diploma or a GED, and nearly one-third had completed at least one year of college, only 6 percent had a degree from either a 2- or 4-year school. Equally troubling, fewer than half of these 23- and 24-year-olds were currently employed, most of those who were employed were not earning a living wage, more than one-quarter had had no income from employment during the past year, and the median earnings of those who had worked was a mere \$8,000. Their lack of economic well-being is also reflected in the economic hardship they reported, the food insecurity they had experienced, and the means-tested benefits they had received. In addition, nearly 40 percent of these young people have been homeless or couch surfed since leaving foster care.

Although far too many of the young men have been incarcerated and far too many of the young women are raising children alone, some of the young people in the Midwest Study have made significant progress toward self-sufficiency despite whatever obstacles they may have faced. They have graduated from college or are still pursuing a degree. They have a steady job and stable housing. They have avoided criminal justice system involvement and can support the families they have formed.

Resiliency is also evident among this sample of former foster youth. Many expressed satisfaction with their lives and optimism about their futures. Moreover, although the child welfare system failed to find them permanent homes, most of these young people continue to have close ties to members of their family.

What, then, should we conclude from the outcomes of these young adults about current efforts to prepare youth aging out of foster care for a successful transition to adulthood? Our data suggest that more than a decade after the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 created the Chafee Independent Living Program, far too many foster youth are not acquiring the life skills or developing the interpersonal connections they will need if they are to become productive young adults. They also raise questions about whether we can realistically expect foster youth to fare much better simply by extending care until age 21 when many young people in the general population continue to receive financial and emotional support from their families well into their early adult years.

Because we have an unprecedented opportunity to follow these young people for another 2 years, we will be able to draw more definitive conclusions about what states as well as the federal government can to do to better prepare foster youth aging out of care for a successful transition to adulthood.

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### **About Chapin Hall**

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.

Chapin Hall's areas of research include child maltreatment prevention, child welfare systems and foster care, youth justice, schools and their connections with social services and community organizations, early childhood initiatives, community change initiatives, workforce development, out-of-school time initiatives, economic supports for families, and child well-being indicators.

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