

2012

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### Recommended Citation

Steffe, Megan and Barry, Carolyn McNamara (2012) "The challenges in the transition to adulthood for foster care youth: a literature review," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 17 : No. 2 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol17/iss2/7>

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# The Challenges in the Transition to Adulthood for Foster Care Youth: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

*The years of emerging adulthood are oftentimes filled with both happiness and anxiety while youth move toward adult roles and responsibilities. According to Courtney and Dworsky (2006), a subset of American emerging adults, those who are transitioning out of foster care face greater vulnerability than do their peers in the general population in a number of issues. As a result, this paper reviewed the literature on the challenges faced by these former foster youth, namely relationships, well-being, substance use, education, employment and finances. Limitations of this extant research are noted along with directions in future research on programs designed to facilitate these former foster youth's transition. Lastly, real-world implications of the findings are discussed.*

*Keywords: adulthood, foster care, youth, challenge, transition*

## Introduction

The transition faced when leaving adolescence and entering into adulthood is a difficult time for emerging adults laden with many changes and important decisions, but also some optimism as well (Arnett, 2004). Unlike many of the emerging adults in the general population, those individuals who have been discharged from foster care are often forced to face this time alone or with relatively little support (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). The period of transition into adulthood presents challenges with respect to education, employment and earnings, economic insecurity, and sexual, violent, or delinquent behaviors that have the potential to shape not only their opportunities and adjustment during emerging adulthood, but also later in development as well (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). According to Cook-Fong (2000), such challenges typically arise due to a lack of social support and guidance, which means that "permanency planning and family preservation are important" (p. 7). Cook-Fong further argues that individuals placed in foster care are in jeopardy, not only because of services they may not be receiving in foster care, but also because of problems in their biological family or poor adjustment to the disruption of being moved into or out of home care.

Programs that have received some research, such as Transition Guardian Plans (TGP), Independent Living Programs (ILP) and Chafee Foster Care Independence Programs (CFCIP), are possible solutions

for the lack of guidance provided to foster youth before emancipation. In large part, "the outcomes of youth who are discharged from foster care indicate that they are not adequately prepared for independent living" (Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010, p. 553). Programs like TGPs, ILPs, and CFCIPs, backed by more research, could potentially address these problems. The goals of programs like these are to extend care past the age of 18 or 19 when youth are usually discharged and provide them with independent living skills (ILP and CFCIP) or to provide them with monetary support to aid in their transition to a more stable adulthood (TGP; Fernandes, 2008; Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2004; Packard, Delgado, Fellmeth, & McCreedy, 2008). By addressing some of the major issues specific to the emerging adults who are transitioning out of foster care, these programs could hope to be implemented with success and be more widespread. Also, despite the positive influences that these programs may bring, there are very few instances of them being in place and helping foster children with their transition to adulthood.

While it is important to have programs for youth who remain in foster care until emancipation, remaining in care is not the best option for all children. Kerman, Wildfire, and Barth (2002) define the two best options for children removed from their biological families as reunification with their family of origin or, if that is not an option, legal adoption. These options are provide children continued support through their eighteenth birthday and well into emerging adulthood.

Since these two options are not always practical or attainable, there are still many youth who remain in foster care. Rather than just being the third option for these youth, there needs to be a focus on making permanent foster care the “third-best” option (Kerman et al., 2002). A way to do this is through better preparation and guidance for emerging adults and modeling foster care systems after a real family support system. This is especially the case because many foster care placements are due to abuse, neglect, mistreatment, parental dysfunction or death, or a disability of the child for which the birth parents are unable to care (Pecora et al., 2006). The types of individuals being placed in care usually have experienced so much dysfunction and instability already. As a result, making foster care systems resemble a family structure could potentially help in their transitions and adjustments by introducing permanency into their lives that was absent before. There is overwhelming evidence in the research that emerging adults “aging out” of the foster care system are in need of intervention and guidance before emancipation in order to avoid pitfalls when facing adulthood.

This paper examines the possible pitfalls of former foster youth as they transition to adulthood and then reviews the limitations of this literature. Examinations of Transition Guardian programs, Independent Living Programs, and the new Chafee Foster Care Independence Programs are then presented and how such programs may be able to improve the lives of former foster youth and in turn benefit society. The need for more research on programs to facilitate this transition is discussed followed by a delineation of the real-world implications of social policies in these matters.

### **Possible Pitfalls Faced by Former Foster Youth**

As emerging adults “age out” of the foster care system, there are many different pitfalls that could affect them because according to Naccarato et al. (2010), “youth who are transitioning to independent living are extremely vulnerable and experience many negative outcomes” (p. 551). Taking into consideration, also, the fact that many of these individuals come from dysfunctional families to begin with and that they are not properly prepared, there seems to be a predisposition toward some of these pitfalls even though they are potentially avoidable.

**Relationships and well-being.** An individual’s well-being may be based on many factors such as genetic predisposition and social relationships. These social relationships of foster youth are much

different compared to youth raised in their family of origin in America because foster youth may undergo many different placements throughout their time in the foster care system. As Cook-Fong (2000) points out, “children in foster care are in a position where a separation has already occurred from the biological parent and separation from a foster parent is likely because of reunification with parents, movement to other foster families, or changes in the level of care that is appropriate” (p. 8). This constant movement and change in the lives of foster youth disrupts attachments and relationship formation, compromising a child’s well-being.

Comparing groups of adults never placed in foster care to those who aged out of the system is one way to assess differences that may be present between the two groups. In 2000, Cook-Fong used those comparison groups to determine which differences, if any, could be seen between the psychological well-being and adjustments in former foster care individuals and the general population through the use of seven variables – life happiness, self-esteem, depression, marital happiness, paternal relationship, maternal relationship, and social isolation. This is an important aspect to study because future psychological well-being is a very possible pitfall of foster youth, and the results of Cook-Fong’s research showed that former foster youth were reporting significantly lower levels in five of the seven categories compared to adults who were never in foster care. Cook-Fong (2000) reports that former foster youth have significantly higher levels of depression and social isolation, as well as lower levels of marital satisfaction, and less intimate maternal and paternal relationships; yet, the reports on life satisfaction and self-esteem were not significantly different. Likely not a coincidence, these individuals fare worse in all four categories representing social relationships than do those not from the foster care system. Indeed, relationships are among the most fragile of the elements in a foster care child’s life and will be a source of struggle for former foster youth upon departure from the system, as well as into their later life.

**Substance use and substance use disorders (SUD).** Individuals from the foster care system face problems late in their adult lives, but some challenges, such as substance abuse, present themselves immediately upon leaving the foster care system. Although substance use also increases across the general population in emerging adulthood, foster care youth aging out of the system can be highly susceptible to these pressures and to developing SUDs (Narendorf & McMillen, 2010).

**Substance use.** Substance use among emerging adults can be seen nationally and within many different subgroups of people. For foster youth, there may be instability in individuals' living situation that could contribute to substance use. After emancipation from the foster care system individuals may find themselves in a number of possible living situations, including living independently, with a relative, or in their biological home. According to the research by Narendorf and McMillen (2010), youth living independently at age 17 (but not 18 or 19) were more likely to report higher rates of getting drunk and using marijuana as compared to those in different living situations. Additionally, they found lower rates of substance use by those 17, 18, and 19 year old individuals who remained in foster care compared to those who left earlier; however, all of the groups saw increases within the first year of leaving care (Narendorf & McMillen, 2010). Although foster youth are more vulnerable during their first year of emancipation, their levels of substance use are lower than are those in the general population (Narendorf & McMillen, 2010). The lower levels of substance use could be due to an inability to acquire and pay for substances rather than a desire to avoid them, but further research would be needed to support that explanation. This finding documents the potential benefit of having foster parents longer into adolescence to support these youth in transitioning to adulthood; however, they are still engaging in substance use and the reasons for the difference are not completely defined.

**Substance use disorders (SUD).** Unlike the rate of substance use in the foster community, substance use disorders are more prevalent for this group than in the general population. Narendorf and McMillen (2010) found that a history of a conduct disorders, a history of sexual abuse, or peers who use alcohol or marijuana predict the onset of an SUD among 18 and 19 year olds. These three predictors listed in the research make some foster youth more susceptible because they are more likely than youth in the general population to have experienced one or more of these factors.

**Education.** Education of today's youth is taken seriously by law makers and legislatures. As more people pursue higher levels of education, a high school diploma does not carry the same status in the working world that it once did. Pecora et al. (2006) found that two in five former foster care individuals went on to receive some form of higher education, but only 20.6% of this group received a degree or certificate. A disproportionately lower number of foster care alumni receive a GED rather than their high

school diploma, which could be due to a number of factors, including lack of encouragement to finish high school rather than a GED, unidentified and untreated mental problems that influence classroom success, high levels of placement instability, a lack of resources, and a lack of support in continuing to higher education (Pecora et al., 2006).

Although some former foster care emerging adults overcome the challenges they face, others do not. These factors, along with greater mobility during this period, work against foster youth making it difficult to receive a solid, uninterrupted education, which has greater implications throughout life. With greater high school dropout rates and significantly lower college enrollment rates than the general population, former foster youth have fewer opportunities for employment and receive less financial compensation for the work that they do (Naccarato et al., 2010). These statistics, while compelling and somewhat informative about the status of education among former foster youth, may not be telling the entire story. The population of foster care youth is not representative of the general population, with a greater proportion of African-American youth being placed into the foster care system, so perhaps a better way to draw these comparisons would be to use similar demographic groups including gender, race, and socioeconomic status. While there are some definitive studies on education trends among the foster care population, more could be done to find viable solutions.

**Employment and finances.** The rate of individuals qualified for a specific job among former foster youth between the ages of 20 and 34 is substantially lower than are those of the general population (Pecora et al., 2006). If these individuals lack the skills for specialized jobs, they may be at risk for underemployment or unemployment. According to Naccarato et al. (2010), "underemployment among former foster youth is reflected in both their low earnings and types of jobs they hold" (p. 552). In fact, the results of that study showed only half of the former foster care group was employed, and their earnings were (on average) not sufficient to rise above the poverty line. The fact that these former foster youth are not always receiving proper education in some cases leaves this group disadvantaged when it comes to job opportunities and financial stability. Foster care alumni's employment status matters in determining future job success and financial independence throughout their lives. There are many other aspects that can be compromised when financial stability is missing, and this is especially important within a group may lack familial or outside support. This has important implications for the emerging adults aging

out of the foster care system and how they can adjust and fit into the world of independent adult living.

### Limitations in Current Research

The current research on the foster care system and its possible affects on personal development is not without limitations. Broadly speaking, research on foster youth typically utilizes correlational research designs, thereby allowing for only statistical control, no manipulation of variables, and only testing of relations among variables, not causality. Thus, there is an inability to, in the words of Cook-Fong (2000), “isolate the specific impact of foster care” on emerging adults’ adjustment (p. 7).

Additionally, sampling limitations plague this literature. Although a range of geographical locations throughout the United States exist, specific studies tend to focus on one specific region at a time, e.g., the Northwest, the Midwest, and Massachusetts. Each of these regions are compared independently of each other meaning members of similar foster care systems are being compared to each other rather than to a potentially different group of foster individuals (Collins & Clay, 2009; Naccarato et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2006). Another sampling issue as described by Daining and DePanfilis (2007) is an overrepresentation of African-American children in foster care, as well as this particular group experiencing longer stays in foster care, which could introduce a racial bias to the research.

Lack of participation, dropout, or under sampling of certain groups also occur in the literature on foster care. Lemon et al. (2005) used a diverse demographic group of former foster youth currently enrolled in a four-year college institution, but most of the literature “[do] not take into account the improvement in well-being that may occur from the time spent in family foster care” and, therefore, do not focus on the groups of former foster youth who may be handling adulthood with precision (Cook-Fong, 2000, p. 9). An entire subgroup of the foster care population is potentially being left out of the research due to the focus on negative aspects. On the other hand, the research by Daining and Depanfilis (2007) may show that the other end of the spectrum for this population also may be missing. When contacting participants for their study, eighteen were unable to participate – fourteen were due to incarceration, three due to death, and one due to hospitalization. If these types of individuals are unable to participate and individuals on the higher end are generally left out, then the research may be reporting on an unrepresentative sample and one that over represents positive adjustment. These are

just some of the limitations faced in research on the foster care system that hopefully will be addressed in future studies.

### Future Research on Programs to Facilitate the Transition

The pitfalls discussed thus far could be avoidable for emancipated foster youth, because the trends seen within that group are significantly higher than in the general population. If these are not problems faced by the majority of youth in the general population, then maybe something can be done to facilitate the transition more effectively for foster youth leaving care. On top of the problem that these youth must move out and face uncertainty, they also may have abuse, neglect, and a lack of permanent relationships in their background, which can negatively affect their transition out of care (Packard et al., 2008). These individuals also may continue to experience some of these negative dynamics if they return to their parents or guardians after leaving care (Fernandes, 2008). More research is needed done in the area of different programs that could be implemented to help change the status of transitioning youth.

**Transition Guardian Plans (TGP).** Packard et al. (2008) propose implementing a program, called a Transition Guardian Plan (TGP), which would “replicate the performance of parents in the transition of their children into independent adulthood” (p. 1269). These scholars compiled information from other successful programs to form the idea for this new proposal. The authors point out that the monetary support provided by parents to emerging adults for expenses such as housing assistance, transportation, utilities, and tuition is not available for former foster youth (Packard et al., 2008). The services provided by this type of program would allow independence without the feeling of abandonment for these individuals because all foster youth would be assigned a guardian with whom they had a previous relationship in order to promote feelings of constancy (Packard et al., 2008). Also a part of this program, a monthly stipend would be given along with proper guidance from the youth’s guardian on how to use that money, and reports of the individual’s progress (Packard et al., 2008).

In order to test a program of this nature, more research needs to be done, first on how to implement the program, and then what kind of results it might yield for the transitioning emerging adults out of the foster care population. The proposed TGP would extend an individual’s care from age 18 to continued guidance and financial support through the age of 23 (Packard et al., 2008). The original cost-benefit

analysis done by Packard et al. (2008) was based on “generally conservative figures and assumptions,” so although figures and data are presented in the report, they are not true findings or based upon real evidence (p. 1270). This program or one like it may help guide individuals in living independently rather than expecting them to go out and do it on their own immediately and it has been suggested that “at a minimum, young people need better support to build strong connections with caring adults,” which TGP’s propose to facilitate (Fernandes, 2008, p. 2). However, no other information could be found about the proposed TGP’s, and therefore, further research is necessary to assess the possibility of a program of this nature.

### **Independent Living Programs (ILP).**

Another possible solution to aid youth transitioning out of care is the more widely known Independent Living Programs (ILP), which was created by Congress as the Independent Living initiative in 1985 (Fernandes, 2008). Although ILP’s were created in 1985, there are very few studies assessing their effectiveness even though the programs are generally thought to improve outcomes for former foster youth (GAO, 1999). Individuals who participate in ILP’s receive services such as aid in attaining educational goals, finding and maintaining employment, managing money, hygiene, housekeeping, and finding a place to live (GAO, 1999; Lemon et al., 2005). According to Lemon et al. (2005), individuals who participated in ILP’s were more likely to have received some training in those areas mentioned above than were those who did not participate in the program. Lemon et al. also included a comparative analysis of characteristics of individuals enrolled in college at the time who participated in ILP’s compared to those who were not involved in the program. Participants in the study completed a survey that was later analyzed by Lemon and colleagues and found that although those who participated in ILP’s were more likely to learn relevant life skills, both groups believed that the foster care system had not prepared them well for college (Lemon et al., 2005).

A 1999 GAO report concluded that there is no information regarding a “national perspective on what services are most needed and which services are less important in preparing youth to live on their own once foster care ends” (p. 17). This report was compiled to explain the extent of services provided under ILP’s and to address the effectiveness issues raised by Congress. The GAO report names some of the services provided by the ILP’s that have downfalls, and although some are still referred to as ILP’s, they were actually replaced in 1999 by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act.

**Chafee Foster Care Independence Programs (CFCIP).** In 1999, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act replaced the old ILP’s with a new program called the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). The new act doubles the funds available to states every year from \$70 million to \$140 million. To be eligible for funds, states must extend care to the foster population who have “aged out” until their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and to those leaving care without being placed in a permanent family (Fernandes, 2008). Much like the ILP it replaces, the CFCIP provides educational assistance, vocational training, mentoring, preventative health activities, and counseling. However, instead of foster care individuals being eligible at 16 or 17 years of age, as was the case with ILP’s, the CFCIP’s were available to individuals expected to remain in care until 18 with no minimum age of eligibility (Fernandes, 2008). Another key difference between ILP’s and CFCIP’s is that the new program requires that independent living services are provided to former foster youth (Fernandes, 2008). The information given on the purposes and intent of the CFCIP’s is promising and addresses fundamental issues affecting the outcomes of former foster youth; however, these programs have many of the same downfalls as ILP’s. In the CRS report (2008), Fernandes reported that early evaluations of these programs could not be demonstrated because the CFCIP lacks “long-term performance measures and time frames for these measures, as well as adequate progress in achieving its annual performance goals” (p. 30). Two assessment tools discussed by Fernandes in the CRS report were evaluations by Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and a GAO report. The CFSR found multiple negative influences on the effectiveness of services including inadequate or non-existent services, a lack of placement resources, and inconsistency of services (Fernandes, 2008). The GAO also reported concerns about the programming with “one-third of the states serving less than half of eligible youth,” gaps in certain services, and a lack of uniform programming in different states (Fernandes, 2008, p.33). As a nationally implemented act, expectations are that the CFCIP’s would be better reported upon as well as better executed, however, as of right now more still needs to be done to discover the best possible way to assist former foster youth with their transition to emerging adulthood through proven effective measures.

**Benefits to society.** Programs like the two just mentioned might be thought to possess certain costs to society due to extended care and funding necessary for them to work. Although there are some unavoidable costs in programs of this nature, according to the cost-benefit analysis done by Packard et al. (2008), there are benefits to society as a whole that may

be worth the investment. The findings showed that the initial cost of providing monetary support to these foster children is not nearly as impactful to society and taxpayers as the costs associated with former foster youth in prisons or on welfare; the benefit of income taxes from this population, if they were able to secure better jobs, would also offset the funding needed for the programs (Packard et al., 2008).

### Real-World Implications

The research has shown that in some cases foster care is related to devastating pitfalls for those involved, yet without experimental research no causation can be inferred from this relationship. Whether or not there is a causal relationship does not undermine that clearly foster care alumni have some clear obstacles during their transition to adulthood and in turn throughout their adult lives. This real-world problem has potential to be solved, albeit not easily. Policy makers can be the agents of change to address this problem, and “given the known risk of poor outcomes and the generally agreed upon vulnerable status of this population, these youth would appear to have legitimate claim to public attention and appropriate assistance” (Collins & Clay, 2009, p. 743). However, they are not the only marginalized group among those during the transition to adulthood, let alone at any life stage vying for the attention of legislatures. This considered, it is important to understand the best way to elevate foster care issues as a priority with policy-makers in order to plead the case for change and improvements.

Collins and Clay (2009) described three steps for helping to move issues into the realm of agenda status – defining the problem, proposing solutions, and politics. A problem must first have agreement for a definition, meaning that there must be one concrete definition that is agreed upon among lobbyists, including actors (Collins & Clay, 2009). Some of the most important factors that should be included in this definition are a lack of concentration on emerging adults in foster care and opportunities for them, fewer or a lack of permanent relationships, and a lack of knowledge about independent living (Collins & Clay, 2009). These few factors are repeated in the literature and can lead to some of the serious pitfalls documented in this paper.

As for adequate solutions to this problem, Collins and Clay (2009) propose focusing on young adults and establishing a sense of permanency, as well as programming that could prepare these individuals for independent living – much like TGPs, ILPs, and

CFCIPs already in place. By providing solutions along with presenting a problem, a step is eliminated for decision makers. Due to the workload of policy makers, proposing a solution eliminates part of the workload for them to take on and they are, therefore, more likely to give an issue agenda status. Politics is a tricky game played not only by politicians, but also by lobbyists, journalists, actors, and many more. The political aspect is driven by “elections, the national mood, and the influence of interest groups” (Collins & Clay, 2009, p. 745). If these three key points are met in the attempt to change the view of foster care, especially for young adults, then there is a chance of pushing policies through that may better or change the current system. The system as is, continues to leave many foster care alumni at risk.

### Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper has shown that former foster youth are more prone to negative outcomes than are their peers in the general population. In fact, Courtney and Dworsky (2006) stated, “exactly one-third of all the young adults [they] interviewed were found to suffer from depression, dysthymia, PTSD, social phobia, alcohol abuse, alcohol dependence, substance abuse and substance dependence” (p. 214-215). Statistics like this one support the fact that former foster youth are a group slipping through the cracks. Encouragingly, there are many opportunities to guide these individuals and to help prepare them for the troubles that they may face in independent living and throughout their adult life. Extending the realm of support for former foster youth is one of the biggest problems for this group because they have usually seen such a lack of permanency and support throughout their lives. Some of the possible support services could increase the amount of guidance and preparation given to foster youth regarding life skills, such as managing finances and finding a job, that will be important to their transition to independent living, while others could provide monetary support to emerging adults to aid them in their first few years of independent living. The research thus far on the foster care population has provided many insights into the relevant issues and posed possible solutions; however, there are limitations to this research. If more research is conducted on foster care and possible support programs, then a clearer definition can be reached and possible solutions can be suggested. With a concrete definition and realistic solutions to the problem, there is a greater chance that policies will be implemented to promote changes in the foster care system that will improve outcomes for this marginalized population.

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