

Aging Out of Foster Care in Missouri

Laura McComas

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*Institute of Public Policy
University of Missouri
137 Middlebush Hall
Columbia, MO 65211*



Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs

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Introduction

This note examines the current status and trends in the provision of transitional services to youth who age out of the foster care system. It also discusses federal support for those services and recent federal initiatives that will impact the Missouri program for former foster care youth as they transition to independence.

Overview

For most young people, the transition to adult independence is a gradual process with many built-in supports. For example, in 2004, analysts estimated that while between the ages of 18-34, adult children received approximately \$38,000 of material and financial assistance from their parents.¹ Older youth who are in foster care, however, typically do not experience this type of support as they make the transition to adulthood. Instead, under state law, the public welfare agency responsible for the care of these foster children is allowed to emancipate them from the system, and thus cease to bear a legal responsibility for the youths' care and supervision. In Missouri, foster care youth emancipate, or age out, of the child welfare system at 18 years of age.

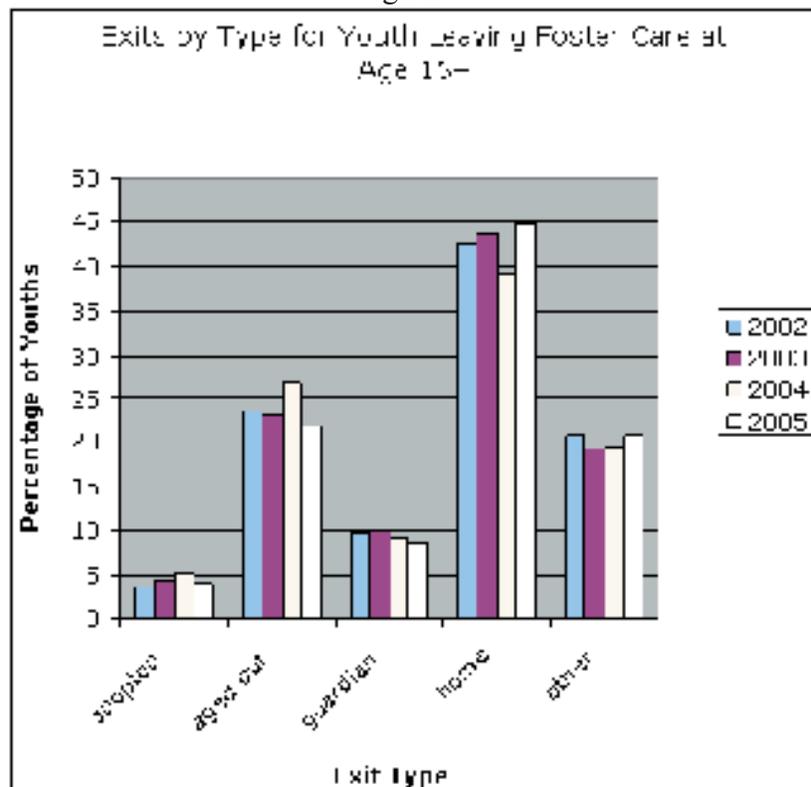
As of March 31, 2007, Missouri's Children's Division had custody of 9,818 youth. One out of ten of these foster care youth (12%) is age 16 or older. Many of these older youth (24%) are neither adopted nor reunified with their biological families by age 18. This means that on average, 266 youth age out of foster care each year in the state of Missouri.² When these children leave foster care without a stable, permanent home, they are faced with a variety of challenges, such as finding a job, finding an affordable place to live, understanding basic finances, and obtaining regular medical care.

Evidence of Negative Outcomes After Foster Care

Youth who age out of foster care on their own typically experience a variety of negative outcomes as they try to overcome these challenges. Data specific to Missouri are limited, but one recent study that tracked former foster care youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin found that by the age of 21:³

- 15% had been convicted of a crime, and 29% had been incarcerated
- 18% had been homeless at least once
- 25% had experienced low to very low food security⁴

Figure 1



Unpublished data (2007). Children's Division, Missouri Division of Social Services

In addition, when compared to a representative sample of 21-year olds who had not been a part of the child welfare system, these foster care youth were shown to fare significantly worse than their peers on a variety of measures. For example:⁵

- 25% had not yet received their high school diploma or GED, compared to 11% of their peers
- Only 30% had completed any college, compared to 50% of their peers
- 49% did not have health insurance coverage, while only 24% of their peers went uninsured

Outcomes for Missouri’s Former Foster Youth

These numbers from Missouri’s neighboring states help provide a framework for understanding how our youth are faring as they age out of foster care. The state of Missouri has not pursued a rigorous tracking of outcomes on former foster care youth due to a general lack of resources. However, anecdotal information from the Children’s Division suggests that these youth are also facing significant challenges in transitioning to adulthood. For example:⁶

- Between one-third and one-half of youth in the foster care system never graduate from high school
- Only 10% of those who do graduate pursue post-secondary education and the educational training vouchers (ETV’s) to which they are entitled
- Approximately 80% of females had a child by age 21
- Approximately 50% have been homeless at least once by age 21

Government Response to Former Foster Care Youth

Over the past decade, federal and state governments have responded to this evidence of the challenges facing former foster care youth. Under current federal law, states are entitled to reimbursement for the care and supervision of foster youth through age 18. Once youth “age out” of the system, states then must rely on the federal funds available through the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA) and the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). The Chafee program provides federal funding for independent living services and support for current and emancipated foster care youth between the ages of 16-21. These services can include but are not limited to: training in daily living skills, substance abuse prevention, mentoring, job placement and retention, financial assistance for housing and post-secondary education, and pregnancy prevention.⁷

Total annual funding for the Chafee Program currently stands at \$140 million. The Chafee Program is not an entitlement program, however, and states are not mandated to provide these services; nor are there any accountability or performance measures that states are currently required to implement.⁸

Missouri’s Response to Former Foster Care Youth

Because states are given wide flexibility in their use of Chafee funds, independent living programs for former foster youth vary widely from state to state. Missouri’s FY 2007 allotment for the Chafee program totaled \$2,928,213,⁹ which was less than 1% of the Children’s Division \$552,737,130 budget.¹⁰

The state currently utilizes these funds in a variety of ways to serve older foster care youth. In addition to funding their version of the CFCIP (called Chafee Aftercare), Missouri also uses its federal Chafee allocation to support transitional living programs for former foster care youth, and to provide services related to establishing independence to youth ages 14-17.5 who are still in foster care. For our purposes, we will focus on Chafee Aftercare, as this program provides the bulk of services and support to youth who have aged out of foster care in Missouri.

Missouri’s Chafee Aftercare services are available to former foster youth who have exited the system after the age of 17.5. Generally, these services include support services, job training, housing, educational assistance, and health care assistance.¹¹

Missouri’s Chafee Aftercare

- Support Services - one-on-one counseling with an older adult to provide guidance on issues related to establishing adult independence and productivity
- Job Training - referrals to job training services; financial assistance during youth’s training period
- Housing - funds to provide a safe shelter to meet basic needs such as food, rent, security deposits, utility deposits, furniture, etc.
- Educational Assistance - funds of up to \$5,000/year until age 21 to enable current or former foster youth to attend accredited colleges, universities, or vocational training institutions (a separate federal funding stream, the Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program, provides money for this)
- Health Care - Medicaid (Medicaid) coverage for former foster youth up to age 21

Preliminary Recommendation: Tracking Outcomes

As stated earlier, Missouri does not formally track the outcomes of youth as they age out of foster care; nor does the state have any coherent data as to the effectiveness of the services provided to these youth.¹² Nonetheless, general evidence suggests that these youth are struggling to transition to independence as they leave their foster homes and the custody of the state, even with the provision of Aftercare services.



Before recommendations can be made for policymakers to address this issue, we must have a better understanding of the challenges youth are facing as they age out of foster care. Rigorous tracking of this population on social, economic, and health outcomes will provide the necessary data to help decision-makers identify the nature and extent of supports required, the types of skill building these youth need, and the most promising strategies for delivering those services.

New Federal Tracking Initiative

According to a newly published rule from the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF), all states will be required to collect and publish data on the outcomes of certain populations of youth, including those who are aging out of foster care. States must collect and report information on six general outcomes for these youth, as well as identify the types of independent living services they are receiving. States have until October 1, 2010 to develop and implement their version of this tracking database. The ACF will penalize states that do not meet this deadline or the requirements of the rule. The penalty could be applied annually, and states could lose between 1-5% of their federal CFCIP funding for noncompliance.¹³ Missouri would stand to lose between \$29,282-\$146,410 each year beginning in fiscal year 2011 (beginning October 1, 2010) if the Children's Division fails to develop a database that tracks the outcomes of transitional youth in accordance with the new federal requirements.

Chafee National Youth in Transition Database

According to a new federal rule, Missouri must track the outcomes of its former foster care youth in the areas of:

- Financial self-sufficiency
- Educational/vocational attainment
- Connections with adults
- Homelessness
- High risk behavior
- Access to health insurance

The ACF estimates that it will cost most states approximately \$250,000 per year to implement this rule. In order to meet this cost, Missouri has two options. First, the Missouri General Assembly can seek legislative approval to appropriate general state revenues to fund ACF's tracking mandate. Alternatively, the Children's Division can bypass the legislative process and simply draw down federal funding from Title IV-E and from their allotment of Chafee funds.¹⁴

While the second option means that money for Aftercare and other independent living services will have to be reallocated to meet the costs of setting up and implementing this tracking system, it will still be beneficial for both the state and its former foster care youth. Doing so and avoiding the penalty will preserve Missouri's full federal funding for Aftercare services. More importantly, policymakers and service providers will be better equipped to provide the types of supports these youth most need to become productive, independent adults. And, with this kind of database, the state will have the necessary data to conduct future evaluations on the cost-effectiveness and outcome impacts of those supports and services.

Conclusion

In sum, youth who age out of foster care face many challenges in transitioning to adult independence and often lack the supports and services necessary to do so. Missouri's former foster youth appear to be struggling to make this transition to adulthood, but few steps can be taken to help them until we have a better understanding of the challenges they face and the services they need. By rigorously tracking their outcomes and services received after care, Missouri will be able to more effectively help these youth transition to adulthood and independence.

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¹⁰ Financial summary (2007). Department of Social Services, Children’s Division.

¹¹ Missouri Department of Social Services, Children’s Division, (2007). *Attention former foster care youth: Do you need Chafee Aftercare?* [Brochure]. Jefferson City, MO.

¹² Within the last 12 months, the Children’s Division has issued service contracts for Chafee services to older youth in care, and for their transitional living program. These contracts require outcome tracking to be done in accordance with the new federal tracking directive.

¹³ Chafee National Youth in Transition Database: Final Rule. Federal Register. (February 26, 2008). 73(38), pgs. 10337-10378.

¹⁴ Ibid at 13.

Author Biography

Laura McComas graduated from the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs in 2008 with a Master’s in Public Affairs. She also received a BS in Social Work from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

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Institute of Public Policy
137 Middlebush
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211
<http://www.truman.missouri.edu/ipp>