FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS
USING DATA TO DRIVE POLICY AND PRACTICE DECISIONS

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

INTRODUCTION

All young people need healthy and permanent relationships with caring adults, reliable resources and accessible opportunities that will ensure their well-being and success.

Young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood need those essentials just as much as anyone else to navigate the twists and turns along the path to adulthood. But their course is often filled with even more obstacles and detours than the typical young person faces — and new data confirm that unless policymakers, child welfare agencies and advocates work to provide essential resources, adulthood will be tough for these young people.

In this first-of-its-kind report, the Annie E. Casey Foundation draws on a new source of national and state-level data to illustrate the experience of transitioning from foster care to adulthood. It is well established that for youth and young adults in foster care, solid connections to nurturing adults and stable communities often are disrupted by multiple home and school moves, academic challenges and a lack of permanent connections to family — only to face disproportionate levels of unemployment and homelessness as adults. What's more, young people of color are far more likely to face barriers to success and well-being.

It's critical that all stakeholders understand the experiences of young people transitioning from foster care in America if outcomes are to improve. The stories behind these data further emphasize the need for policymaker engagement and guide steps to be taken to improve the well-being of young people in foster care. In its 17 years of working with child welfare leaders, policymakers and young people across the country, the Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® has uncovered persistently stark data, including these new findings:

• Half of older teens who left foster care aged out versus being reunited or connected with a family.

• A third have been removed from their home and placed in foster care multiple times.

• Half have experienced three or more foster care placements.

Using the *Fostering Youth Transitions* state profiles

Each profile highlights a state's key demographic data about young people in foster care that can be used to help pinpoint disparities across racial and ethnic lines. The profiles also show whether and how young people are accessing available resources, which can help leaders determine whether changes need to be made to ensure greater awareness of and accessibility to resources such as extended foster care.

Readers should digest the data and ask how young people in foster care in their state are faring — and what more can be done to help ensure lifelong well-being and success.

RELATIONSHIPS: How well is your state doing at ensuring young people have been connected to permanent families before they leave foster care? Can more be done to ensure connections for them to mentors and other supportive, caring adults?

RESOURCES: How well is your state doing at ensuring young people are aware of available resources and services that provide a safety net and can help them achieve economic well-being?

OPPORTUNITIES: How well is your state doing at ensuring young people are being given education, employment and other chances to learn and grow during what is a key developmental phase in their lives?

- A third experienced a group home or institutional placement during their most recent stay in foster care.

- Less than a quarter of young people who received a federally funded transition service received services for employment, education or housing. (All states receive federal funds to help young people transition from foster care to adulthood.)

These data illustrate the separation from family and instability these young people face in foster care. These experiences are tied to the negative outcomes they often face later upon transitioning to adulthood. The data clearly show how these young people are falling behind their peers. How we support the lives of young people in and transitioning from foster care has lifelong consequences, as well as national implications.

The question before child welfare leaders, state and federal policymakers and others in our communities is clear: What more must be done to ensure that all young people in foster care — regardless of where they live, their race or ethnicity — have the relationships, resources and opportunities to thrive as they transition to adulthood?

Fostering Youth Transitions is a state-by-state data compilation designed to show state policymakers and other key stakeholders how young people are faring as they move from foster care to adulthood. The report shows the clear need for better policies and practices to give young people in foster care the opportunity to have brighter futures.

Surveys and administrative data show that young people with foster care experience are falling behind their peers who have not experienced foster care. This is particularly the case for youth of color, who are overrepresented in foster care. In fact, in about half of states, black youth ages 14-21 are more than three times more likely to be in foster care than young white people. These realities emphasize the importance of ensuring that all young people have chances for permanent family connections, postsecondary education, stable employment, secure housing and support for those who become parents. The data raise three areas of particular concern about the relationships, resources and opportunities youth in foster care need to become successful adults:

- **Relationships:** In 2016, half of teens aged 16 and older who exited foster care were emancipated, which means they left care without being successfully reunified with their family or connected to another family through adoption or legal guardianship. The rate of young people emancipating from care was 10 percent higher for black youths and 11 percent higher for Hispanic youths than the rate of their white peers. Experiencing stable living arrangements while in foster care increases the likelihood that young people will exit foster care to family. Yet half of them will experience three or more placements, which compromises their ability to form trusting and lasting relationships.

- **Resources:** Young people who do not have family to rely upon need additional support as they enter adulthood. Remaining in foster care until age 21 provides greater access to resources, which helps avoid the typically adverse experienced by young people who age out at 18. Only about one-quarter of 18-year-olds remain in foster care until their 19th birthdays. This is partly the result of states maintaining policies that do not allow or encourage young people to extend their time in foster care. An even greater percentage (30 percent) of 19- and 21-year-olds who had been in foster care reported experiencing homelessness, which emphasizes the need to provide housing-related services within foster care and across systems.

- **Opportunities:** Ensuring young people are connected to school and work is critical to their lifelong success. By age 21, young people who experienced foster care reported significantly lower rates of high school completion and employment than all young people in the general population. Black youth experience some of the most significant disconnection. For instance, in over a third of states, less than half of young African Americans have earned their high school diploma or GED by age 21, and nationally less than half are employed by age 21.

But data are only part of the picture. Policymakers, child welfare leaders, advocates and others need to use these and other data to raise critical questions and explore solutions. The Casey Foundation calls on these leaders to engage in this process with young people who are in or have experienced foster care. Young people can provide the greatest insight into what they have experienced while in foster care and how that has or hasn't contributed to their transition from foster care and success as young adults. They should be asked about agency efforts to promote permanent family connections, education, employment, life skills and parenting support.

While the data are essential to systems being able to evaluate their efforts, many states are missing opportunities to collect data on transition services and outcomes. As a result, some state reporting is incomplete. This underreporting inhibits the ability for policymakers and systems leaders to have a complete picture of how states are serving young people.

Despite these limitations, *Fostering Youth Transitions* highlights the most comprehensive data ever collected across states to assess how young people are faring as they transitioned from foster care to adulthood. These data are critical for helping determine if policies and interventions were responsive to their needs and if new approaches should be considered.

Conclusion

Over 171,000 youth in our country who have been removed from their families are now in foster care. Far too many of them are neither reunited with their families nor connected with another permanent family. This occurs despite the fact that as a nation we know every kid needs a family.

Policymakers must grapple with the number of young people exiting foster care each year without family, as well the poor access to resources and opportunities they experience that make successful transitions to adulthood less likely. Once areas of needed reform are identified, all involved must hold themselves accountable to working with young people to take action.

This document provides a detailed description of the datasets and measures used for the data analysis in the *Fostering Youth Transitions* national brief and state data documents. Three primary datasets contain information on young people (14+) with foster care experience in the United States.

The datasets used are the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Foster Care File, the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Outcomes File and the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Services File. In this document you will find a description of each dataset (what information it contains, how often it is updated and the data source — e.g., administrative, self-report), the population from the dataset included in the current analysis and a detailed description of the measures from the dataset. The description of the measure will provide an overview of variable(s) used to create the measure and how the findings should be interpreted.

AFCARS

DATASET DESCRIPTION

AFCARS is a federally mandated data collection system that provides information on all children in foster care throughout the fiscal year (FY). The datasets, released annually, contain administrative data on each child's demographics, information about their most recent removal and details on their foster parents. This analysis uses the FY 2016 foster care file.

POPULATION FOR ANALYSIS

This analysis restricted the dataset to those between the ages of 14 and 21 at the end of FY 2016. The maximum age limit is set at 21 — the maximum age of eligibility for foster care services in most states. If a young person is missing data for a specific measure, he or she is not included in that measure.

MEASURES

Demographics of transition-aged young people in foster care

• **Race/ethnicity.** A count of young people between the ages of 14 and 21 in each racial/ethnic group who were in foster care at some point in FY 2016. For each state, the three largest racial/ethnic categories in foster care during FY 2016 are reported. The group with more than one race on some factsheets is young people with many different racial compositions. Young people who are more than one race and of Hispanic ethnicity are included in the Hispanic group.

• **Sex.** The sex of the child as reported by the state.

• **Age.** The age of each young person at the end of FY 2016.

- **Number of placements.** This measure provides the number of placements in the current foster care episode. An episode is a single instance of entering foster care. Within a single episode, one could experience multiple placements. Trial home visits are not considered a placement setting, so some young people (<1 percent) were listed as having zero placements. These young people are not included in this measure.

- **Total number of removals.** The total number of times the young person was removed from the home, including the current removal. The sample showed that 90 percent experience one or two removals. Due to data available at the state level, all young people with two or more removals were reported in the same category.

- **Exit reason (16+).** This only includes those young people who exited care during FY 2016. The age range was limited to 16 and older to avoid skewing the data with younger children who are unable to exit care due to emancipation or aging out.
  - *Permanency* includes the following discharge reasons: reunified with parent(s), living with a relative, adoption and guardianship.
  - *Emancipation* only includes those with a discharge reason of emancipation.
  - *Other* includes young people with a discharge reason of death, runaway or transfer to another agency.

- **Most recent placement setting.** Represents the most recent placement setting for each young person. Young people whose most recent placement setting is missing (<1 percent of the sample) are excluded from the analysis.
  - *Home placement* includes pre-adoptive homes, relative foster homes and nonrelative foster homes.
  - *Group placement* includes institutions and group homes.

- **Median length of stay, by exit reason (16+).** Represents the median length of stay in months of young people who have left care, by exit reason. To maintain consistency with the exit reason measure, we limited these data to those ages 16 and older at the end of the fiscal year.

Extended care utilization

- **In care on 18th birthday.** Day of birth is set to the 15th of the month for all young people in the dataset for confidentiality purposes. As a result, young people are considered to be in care on their 18th birthday if they are still in care at any point during the month of their 18th birthday. This cohort is created using the AFCARS Foster Care file from FY 2015 so foster care status at age 19 could be examined using the FY 2016 data file.

- **Still in care on 19th birthday.** Young people are considered to be in care on their 19th birthday if they 1) are included in the FY 2016 data file, meaning they spent time in care during that fiscal year, and 2) if their discharge date is either missing, meaning they have not left care or if it is the month following their 19th birthday. Differences in data reporting practices at the state level likely result in a conservative national estimate for extended care utilization and unreliable numbers at the state level. Some states choose to create a new case in AFCARS when the young person reaches the age of majority, making it difficult to track individuals over time. Other states choose not to include young people who remain in care over the age of 18 in their AFCARS reporting file.

NYTD Services

States report semiannually on all young people receiving any federally funded, Chafee Independent Living Service (ILS). This administrative dataset is released annually. This analysis uses the NYTD Services file for FY 2015. Because this dataset only includes information on Chafee-funded services, it will not capture any ILS funded through other sources.

This analysis restricted the dataset to those 14 years or older. Because data are collected semiannually, young people can be included twice in the same fiscal year. To avoid duplicated counts in this analysis, only the most recent record for young people who were receiving services is included.

- **Room and board assistance.** Includes payments made by the state to help support room and board. These payments may include: rent deposits, utilities or other start-up household expenses.

- **Education financial assistance.** Payments made by the state to help support educational necessities. These payments may include: textbooks, uniforms, computers, tuition, scholarships, tutoring, ACT/SAT, GED and other educational tests.

- **Employment programs or vocational training.** Includes participation in Chafee-funded apprenticeships, internships or summer training programs. Additionally, it covers vocational training including classes or other participation in occupational training (e.g., cosmetology classes, auto mechanics, nursing, welding, etc.).

NYTD Outcomes

Young people who are in foster care within 45 days following their 17th birthday are eligible to complete the NYTD Outcomes baseline survey. Those who complete the survey at 17 are eligible to complete follow-up surveys at 19 and 21. Some states choose to sample from their baseline cohort (those who completed the survey at 17) for the follow-up waves. Outcomes data in this file are self-reported, and young people may choose to decline to answer any question in the survey.

This analysis examines outcomes for the first cohort of young people in the NYTD Outcomes dataset. The numbers reflect outcomes reported by these young people at age 21 in FY 2015.

- **Young parents.** This table provides the number and percentage of respondents who report having a child by age 21. It includes any respondents who reported ever having a child at age 17 or having a child within the past two years on either follow-up survey.

- **Employed.** Young people are considered employed if they report working either part or full time at the time they completed the survey (age 21).

- **Stable housing.** Young people are considered to have stable housing if they did not report experiencing homelessness on either of their follow-up surveys (those taken at age 19 and 21). In those surveys, respondents are asked if they've been homeless in the past two years. Limiting our scope to the follow-up survey responses captures experiences related to the time these young people spend transitioning out of the foster care system.

- **High school diploma/GED.** This reflects the young person's highest educational achievement at the time they take the survey (age 21). Young people are considered to have earned their high school diploma or GED if they indicate they've earned one of those certifications or a higher certification, such as a vocational certificate or associate degree.

American Community Survey

DATASET DESCRIPTION

The American Community Survey (ACS) is administered annually to a random sample of individual households and group living facilities (e.g., nursing homes, college dorms, detention centers). This analysis uses data from five-year estimates for fiscal years 2012-2016 to align with the data available in AFCARS.

POPULATION FOR ANALYSIS

This analysis restricted the dataset to those 14 to 21 years of age. This age range was selected to match the one provided in AFCARS.

MEASURES

- **Race/ethnicity.** Provides the race/ethnicity in the general population of young people 14–21. For each state, the same three racial/ethnic categories that are reported from AFCARS are reported from the general population.

- **Employed.** Young people are considered employed if they report working either part or full time at age 21.

- **High school diploma/GED.** Reflects the young person's highest educational achievement at age 21. Young people are considered to have earned their high school diploma or GED if they indicate they've earned one of those certifications or a higher certification, such as a vocational certificate or associate degree.

Quick Reference for More Information

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