

FFTA



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R. C., O'Brien, K., White, C. R., Williams, J., Hiripi, E., English, D., White, J., & Herrick, M. A. (2006). Educational and employment outcomes of adults formerly placed in foster care: Results from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*(12), 1459–1481.

Keywords

Education and employment outcomes, foster care, longitudinal research, Northwest Alumni

Research Questions

Little is known about the long-term outcomes for youth in foster care. Extant research studies are limited by small sample sizes, brief follow-up periods, lack of precision in measurement, and research design flaws.

The Northwest Alumni Study was designed to evaluate how young adults who had been placed in foster care were functioning. The three major research questions were:

1. What were the educational achievements of the alumni?
2. What was the financial situation of the alumni?
3. What foster care experiences were associated with educational achievement and a positive financial situation?

Method

Subjects: The subjects were young adults who had been placed by Casey Family Programs or by the state child welfare agency in Seattle, Tacoma, or Yakima, Washington, or Portland, Oregon, and were served between January 1, 1988 and September 30, 1998. To be included in this study, participants had to have been in foster care for 12 or more months when they were between the ages of 14 and 18. They could not have any physical or developmental disabilities and could not have been placed for reasons of refugee status. A total of 659 alumni fit these criteria.

Design: Case records were reviewed and rated, providing information on living arrangements before placement, parent functioning, child maltreatment, reasons for initial placement, mental and physical health problems, and youth disabilities and diagnoses.

Structured telephone interviews were also conducted with alumni; 479 alumni were interviewed (response rate of 75.7%). The interview included questions concerning ethnicity; access to and

participation in educational, mental health, and independent living services; resources upon leaving care; and foster family and nurturing supports while in care.

Procedures: The study reviewed case records for the total sample of 659 alumni and interviewed 479 of these alumni between September 2000 and January 2002. Whenever possible, alumni outcomes were compared to the outcomes from the general population. To conduct optimization (regression) analyses, foster care experiences (independent variables) and outcomes (dependent variables) groups were formed using theory, distribution of data, and practice perspectives. Optimization analysis answers this question: If you could optimize all the foster care factors, what combination of factors would produce the most positive outcomes for a young adult, such as employment and adequate income? This analysis is unique because rather than identifying predictors of negative outcomes, it identifies the constellation of factors that seem to predict positive outcomes, thus providing guidance for program services.

Results/Findings

The results focused on the relationship between educational and employment outcomes and experiences in foster care.

Risk Factors

- Of the alumni in the study, 93.3% experienced maltreatment by their birth family, which was the most common reason for placement.
- Almost two thirds of alumni birth mothers had substance abuse problems and over a third had criminal problems; not quite one half of alumni birth fathers had substance abuse problems and over a third had criminal problems.
- The most frequent child mental health diagnosis while in care was ADHD.
- The mean age of alumni entering foster care was 11, and the mean exit age was 18.5.
- Alumni had an average of 6.5 placements while in care, with a mean placement change rate of 1.4 placements per year. Almost one third had 8 or more placements while in care.
- Almost a third reported 10 or more school changes from elementary to high school, and 8 in 10 reported “a lot” of therapeutic services while in care.
- Slightly over half reported being “somewhat” or “very” prepared for independent living, although only one quarter to just over a third left foster care with a driver’s license, money, or dishes and utensils.
- Just over a third found their foster parent to be “a lot” helpful, less than half had a close confiding relationship with an adult, and about a third reported maltreatment while in care.
- One in five experienced homelessness of more than one night in the year after leaving foster care.

Education Achievement (Question 1)

- Of the alumni in the study, 84.4% completed high school, which is comparable to the rate for the general population, but the rate of GED acquisition by alumni was 6 times the national rate. Further, the rate of completion of post-secondary education was less

than that of the general population—the college completion rate of 2.7% for those 25 years of age and older was over 8 times less than that of the general population.

Employment and Finances (Question 2)

- The employment rate of 80% was lower than the national average, and the number receiving cash assistance was 5 times the general population rate.
- One third lived in households at or below the poverty threshold, and the poverty rate of alumni was 3 times the national rate.

In summary, although high school completion rates were high, the rates at which alumni completed high school with a GED were high, post-secondary completion rates were low, and many alumni were in precarious and vulnerable economic situations.

What experiences are associated with a positive outcome? That is, what program changes would improve the long-term education, financial, and employment outcomes for youth who had been in foster care? (Question 3)

This question was answered using optimization analysis (please see the article for a description of the steps of optimization analysis).

- Improving placement history (e.g., reducing the number of placement moves) was associated with a 17.8% improvement in education outcomes.
- Improving resources when leaving care was associated with a 14.6% increase in education outcomes.
- Optimizing all foster care experience variables was associated with a 25% increase in positive education outcomes.
- Improving placement history was associated with a 7% improvement in employment/financial outcomes.
- Improving educational experiences was associated with a 7% improvement in employment/financial outcomes.
- Improving resources when leaving care was associated with a 12% improvement in employment/financial outcomes.
- Optimizing all foster care experience variables was associated with a 28% improvement in positive employment and financial outcomes.

Limitations

The variables measuring foster family and other nurturing supports were not well conceptualized.

Application to Practice

Optimizing foster care situations via changes in program practices and policy can improve the long-term outcomes for youth in foster care. What follows are just a few program and policy

recommendations from the authors. Many of these recommendations can be implemented at the program level.

- Encourage and support youth to get a high school diploma. Policy and system changes should focus on more training and support for teachers working with youth in foster care and on educating judges about the importance of youth staying in school.
- Implement early identification and effective evidence-based treatment of mental health problems that can interfere with learning and staying in school.
- Minimize placement changes. Examine administrative processes and policies; look at lack of support for foster parents and behavior problems of youth.
- Provide concrete resources to youth as they leave care (e.g., \$250 in cash, dishes, and utensils) and make sure that they have a driver's license.
- Provide better preparation and support for post-secondary education, such as planning for college or vocational programs, enrolling youth in college preparation programs such as Upward Bound, and helping with applying for and securing financial aid.
- Overhaul independent living preparation: Redirect funds to evidence-based practices for independent living and provide youth with a transition plan that includes independent development accounts. Youth should be provided with a broad foundation in life skills as well as concrete resources.
- Extend foster care services and supports to age 21.
- Provide targeted education support services and education enrichment, such as tutoring, to address education deficiencies and minimize the number of school changes.
- Strengthen housing programs and other supports to prevent homelessness, such as by finding family or identifying nurturing and supporting adults and by encouraging the youth to maintain relationships with supportive adults so that they have someplace to go during difficult times.
- Strengthen transitional housing and community housing systems so that foster care alumni have access to safe and affordable housing.

Contact Information

Peter Pecora, Casey Family Programs, 1300 Dexter Avenue N., Seattle, WA 98109. E-mail: ppecora@casey.org

Kirk O'Brien, Casey Family Programs, 1300 Dexter Avenue N., Seattle, WA 98109. E-mail: kobrien@casey.org