



FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS

USING DATA TO DRIVE POLICY AND PRACTICE DECISIONS





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ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

ABOUT THE JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

A unit of the Casey Foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® works to improve outcomes for all young people in the United States ages 14 to 26 who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday — a population of nearly 1 million. Working with 17 sites across the country, the Jim Casey Initiative influences policy and practices to improve outcomes for teenagers and young adults who have experienced foster care as they transition to adulthood.

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 experiences of 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.