

Higher Education Opportunities for **FOSTER YOUTH**

A PRIMER FOR POLICYMAKERS



Thomas R. Wolanin

THE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

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This report, “Higher Education Opportunities for Foster Youth: A Primer for Policymakers,” is one of a series of studies designed to examine how and why specific groups appear to be slipping through the cracks of the American system of postsecondary educational opportunity. The series also explores how the experiences of these groups relate to broader barriers posed by income and race.

Ultimately, the project expects to inform higher education leaders, government policymakers, advocacy groups, and the media about the unaddressed barriers to access and success for underserved student groups, and will move from diagnosis to action through government policy recommendations and other change strategies. This multi-year effort is funded by the Ford Foundation.

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Executive Summary

Foster youth, those who have spent at least one year as a ward of the court after age 13, are among America's most disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for higher education.

Foster youth have yet to follow the path of low-income persons, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and students with disabilities in having their need for higher education recognized and having concentrated and effective efforts made on their behalf to ensure their access to higher education and their success in higher education.

During FY 2003 approximately 800,000 children and youth under the age of 18 were in foster care. They stay in care for a mean and median length of time of 31 and 18 months respectively, and 16 percent are in foster care for five or more years. On average, foster youth have three residential placements, and there are anecdotal reports of 10, 20, or even more placements. Most foster youth are placed with a foster family of non-relatives (46 percent), and the second largest group is placed in a foster family of relatives (23 percent). When foster youth exit the system about half of them (55 percent) are reunited with their parent(s), and the next largest group (18 percent) is adopted.

This report focuses on foster youth who aged-out of foster care at age 18 or who have spent at least one year in foster care after age 13. At any time, there are approximately 300,000 of these foster youth between the ages of 18 and 25, the prime college-going years. About 150,000 of these foster youth have graduated from high school and are college qualified. Of these college-qualified foster youth about 30,000 are attending postsecondary education. The rate at which foster youth complete high school (50 percent) is significantly below the rate at which their peers complete high school (70 percent). Also, the rate at which college-qualified foster youth attend postsecondary education (20 percent) is substantially below the rate at which their peers attend (60 percent). If foster youth completed high school and attended postsecondary education at the same rate as their peers, nearly 100,000 additional foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old age group would be attending higher education. This is the size of the gap in opportunity for higher education between foster youth and their peers, and it is the magnitude of the policy problem to equalize opportunities for foster youth.

By definition foster youth have been subject to two traumatic experiences: the neglect or abuse that brought them to the attention of the authorities and the removal from their family. Some are traumatized a third time by the treatment they receive while in the foster care system. These traumatic experiences are the root of the unique barriers to higher education opportunities faced by foster youth.

As a result of these traumas, foster youth often do not achieve the level of adult skill and maturity needed to live and act independently in the inherently adult world of higher education. They have not learned adult competency from sustained and caring relationships with adults, particularly their parents. Overworked, underpaid, and insufficiently trained social workers, foster parents who turn over frequently and who also do not receive

adequate training and support, and overburdened school counselors do not in general provide the adult mentoring and nurturing needed by these youth.

Independent living programs, particularly those supported by the federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, aim to help foster youth generally between the ages of 16 and 21 to make the transition to self-sufficiency. However, these programs serve only about half of the eligible foster youth. More importantly, most foster youth do not receive a sufficiently practical, sustained, and comprehensive program. Therefore, they often cannot keep appointments, manage a bank account, find an apartment, shop for groceries, cook meals, drive a car, navigate public transportation, and undertake other basic tasks of a self-sufficient adult, which are a prerequisite for success in higher education.

In addition to lacking adult skills, foster youth often develop mental illness and emotional fragility that are significant barriers to higher education opportunities. One study of foster youth alumni found that nearly half of them (54 percent) had diagnosed mental health problems, more than twice the rate of the general population. In order of frequency, they had post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, social phobia, panic syndrome, and generalized anxiety disorder. Twenty percent had three or more conditions. Compared to the general population, foster youth also experience more serious mental disorders, and they recover less often or more slowly. Many foster youth with mental disorders do not receive adequate treatment either as youth or adults in part because they do not have the life skills to seek and benefit from treatment. These disorders compromise the ability of many foster youth to finish high school, apply for college, organize financing and living arrangements, and progress through higher education to a degree.

Along several dimensions, including attendance, progress from grade to grade, grade point average and performance on standardized tests, foster youth do less well in school generally than their peers and therefore have lower rates of high school graduation. Foster youth are thus less frequently college qualified than their peers. The relatively low levels of educational attainment among foster youth are caused in part by the fact that they often do not have adult models of educational success to guide them.

The most important barrier to educational attainment and high school graduation that is unique to foster youth is the frequent disruptions of their education by changes in school placement. Foster youth change schools about once every six months, and some research suggests that they lose an average of four to six months of educational attainment each time they change schools. Taken together these findings suggest that in general foster youth may make no educational progress while in care.

Changing schools is particularly disruptive to the education of foster youth because it reinforces a cycle of emotional trauma of abandonment and repeated separations from adults and friends. Also, school changes make educational delays and disruptions longer and more severe for foster youth because of the complex legal and educational situations that must be managed by the school and child welfare bureaucracies. In addition, there is often confusion about who has the legal authority to make educational decisions for a foster youth. Finally, those with the responsibility for foster youth (including the courts, social workers, foster parents, and school personnel) often fail to act diligently and in due time to best serve the education of foster youth.

The rates of college attendance and degree completion are dramatically lower for foster youth compared to their peers: a rate of college attendance of 20 percent compared to 60 percent, and a rate of degree completion of 5 percent or less compared to 20 percent. These low rates are caused in part by the weak academic preparation of even those who graduate from high school and the lack of high expectations for college attendance by those responsible for the care and education of foster youth. These youth also are often not aware of the college opportunities available to them, and they do not have the practical knowledge and skills to successfully navigate the college application process. Foster youth are disproportionately low-income, and there often is not enough financial aid available to them to pay the cost of college or they do not connect with available aid. These youth also often perceive the cost of college as a more insurmountable barrier than it is in fact.

Many of the programs to assist low-income and first-generation-in-college students, such as foster youth, including the federal TRIO and GEAR UP programs, often do not effectively reach out to foster youth or take into account their unique circumstances. The independent living programs available to foster youth frequently are not effective in providing the skills needed to complete the college admission and financial aid processes. Financial aid forms are also an added barrier to foster youth because the forms make it difficult to recognize the special circumstances of these youth.

► **Recommendations that can be acted on in the short run to improve the higher education opportunities of foster youth**

- Foster youth, those who aged-out of foster care or spent at least one year in care after age 13, should be given adequate time to mature by extending their eligibility for support through independent living and other programs up to age 24.
- All states should be required to provide Medicaid coverage for foster youth up to age 24, especially to enable them to obtain mental health services.
- All the professionals who deal with foster youth should not schedule appointments during school hours. This strategy would reduce interruptions in the education of foster youth and serve as a concrete way for foster care professionals to recognize the importance and priority of the education of foster youth.
- The number of educational placements should be minimized by arranging whenever possible to keep foster youth in the same school even when residential placement changes.
- When a change in educational placement is necessary, it should be accomplished with minimal disruption of the foster youth's education, such as by making the change between school terms.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should carry out its legislative mandate to systematically evaluate independent living programs and to encourage adoption of those programs that work best.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should carry out its legislative mandate to collect timely and accurate data about the educational attainment of foster youth, and use that data as a measure of accountability for the "well-being" of foster youth.

- The federal TRIO programs and GEAR UP should be amended to provide for more effective outreach and services for foster youth.
- The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) should clearly identify the options available to foster youth, and the federal financial aid process should be more simple and flexible to meet the unique circumstances of these youth.
- The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance should be mandated and provided with resources to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the barriers to accessing financial aid faced by foster youth and make recommendations to remove those barriers.

➤ **Longer-term recommendations to improve the higher education opportunities of foster youth**

- Social workers should be more adequately paid, receive higher levels of professional training and have more reasonable case loads so that they can provide more sustained, intensive, and effective service to foster youth.
- Foster parents should be more adequately compensated, better enabled to deal with increasing record-keeping and reporting requirements, and encouraged to support the educational attainment of their foster children.
- Independent living programs should be available to all foster youth after age 14.
- Independent living programs should emphasize and support educational attainment and provide practical adult competency skills in areas such as housing, personal finances, transportation, personal care, medical, dental and mental health, and interpersonal relations.
- Independent living programs should be sustained, intensive, and comprehensive rather than episodic, perfunctory, and fragmentary.
- Federal, state, local, and private independent living programs should be better coordinated.
- All the professionals who deal with foster youth and foster parents should have high educational expectations for these youth, recognizing that most of them are “college material” who should be encouraged to participate in a rigorous curriculum.
- The professionals who deal with foster youth and foster parents should be given better information and training about assisting these youth in applying for college admissions and financial aid.
- Independent living programs should include better information and training related to the college application and financial aid processes.
- Financial aid adequate to meet the financial need of low-income foster youth should be made available, especially in the form of grants.

Introduction

This report is about making opportunities for higher education available in the United States to all who can benefit from them, a topic that is usually examined by analyzing the relationship between broad demographic variables such as income, race, ethnicity, and gender and participation in higher education.¹ However, in addition to such demographic groups, there are also identifiable subgroups or subpopulations in the United States that face unique barriers to the opportunity for higher education beyond those associated with income, race, ethnicity, and gender. These subgroups include students with disabilities, the incarcerated, undocumented youth, migrant farm workers, and foster youth. This report focuses on the unique barriers to higher education opportunities faced by foster youth.

A 2003 national poll found that most Americans know little about foster care or about the policy issues related to it.² Foster care is likewise unfamiliar to most of those who staff America's institutions of postsecondary education and those who are responsible for higher education policy in the federal and state governments. Therefore, a brief description of the path a youth takes through the foster care system is a good place to begin the discussion of higher education opportunities for foster youth.³

The story often begins with an anonymous call to a child-abuse hotline alleging maltreatment of a youth under age 18. A social worker or the police are dispatched to investigate, and if evidence of abuse or neglect is found, the child protection agency petitions the appropriate court to authorize removal of the child from his or her home. In emergency situations the agency can place the youth in temporary foster care prior to receiving a court order. In 2001, child protective agencies received three million allegations of maltreatment involving five million youth. Neglect was the most common form of maltreatment, cited in nearly 60 percent of the referrals, and includes inadequate housing, child care, nutrition, and medical care. An additional 30 percent of referrals were for physical or sexual abuse. Forty-one percent of the youth experienced more than one type of maltreatment. Other reasons for youth to enter the foster care system include the absence of parents resulting from death, illness, disability, or other reasons, delinquent behavior by the youth, or a juvenile offense such as truancy.⁴ The parents of youth referred to the child protective services agency are frequently substance abusers.⁵

¹ In this report the terms “higher education,” “postsecondary education,” and “college” are used interchangeably.

² See, “Results of a National Survey of Voters” conducted for the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care” retrieved June 22, 2005 from <http://pewfostercare.org/docs/index.php?DocID=21>. This poll indicated that only 33 percent of those surveyed were “very” or “fairly” familiar with the issue of foster care.

³ This description relies heavily on the excellent background paper *A Child's Journey Through the Child Welfare System*, written by Sue Badeau and Sarah Gesiriech for the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care retrieved June 23, 2005 from <http://pewfostercare.org/docs/index.php?DocID=24>.

⁴ Youth in foster care are children (under age 18) who are provided 24-hour substitute care away from their parent(s) or guardian(s) and for whom a state agency has placement and care responsibility. They are often referred to as “wards of the court” or “wards of the state.” See, “AFCARS, Reporting Population,” retrieved September 20, 2005 from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws/cwpm/policy_dsp.jsp?citID=110.

⁵ Kathy Barbell and Madelyn Freundlich, *Foster Care Today* (Washington, DC: Casey Family Programs, 2001) pp. 11–12.

When a case of alleged mistreatment is brought before the court, the judge decides either to send the youth home with or without services and supervision or to remove the youth from his or her home. If the judge decides that the youth should be removed from his or her parents, the youth is taken from home, usually without advance warning, by uniformed police officers. Youth who are removed from their homes pursuant to a court order are in state custody and are wards or dependents of the court. Some of these young people come to think of themselves as “state property.”⁶ In 2001, approximately 800,000 youth spent some time in court-supervised care during the year, having been removed from their homes. Those removed from their homes are initially placed in an emergency out-of-home placement and assigned a case worker who develops a case plan. This plan seeks to provide a safe placement for the youth, attempts to reunite the youth with his or her family, and tries to otherwise serve the youth’s best interests and special needs. To achieve the goal of reunification the case plan usually provides for services such as parenting classes, mental health and substance abuse treatment, family counseling, or subsidized child care.

Ideally the case worker visits the child at least once each month and the court reviews the case every six months to determine what progress has been made in implementing the case plan and if the placement is still necessary and appropriate. Within 12 months of the initial placement the court holds a hearing to determine the future permanent status of the foster youth. At this time, or even earlier if the circumstances warrant, the court may approve the termination of parental rights. For example, if a parent has murdered a youth’s sibling or subjected a youth to torture or sexual abuse, family reunification is not an option. In such cases as well as when case plans for family reunification have not been successful, the case plan goal may shift from family reunification to adoption or long-term foster care ultimately ending in the emancipation of the youth at age 18. The overall goal in all cases is a safe and permanent placement in which the well-being of the youth will be served.

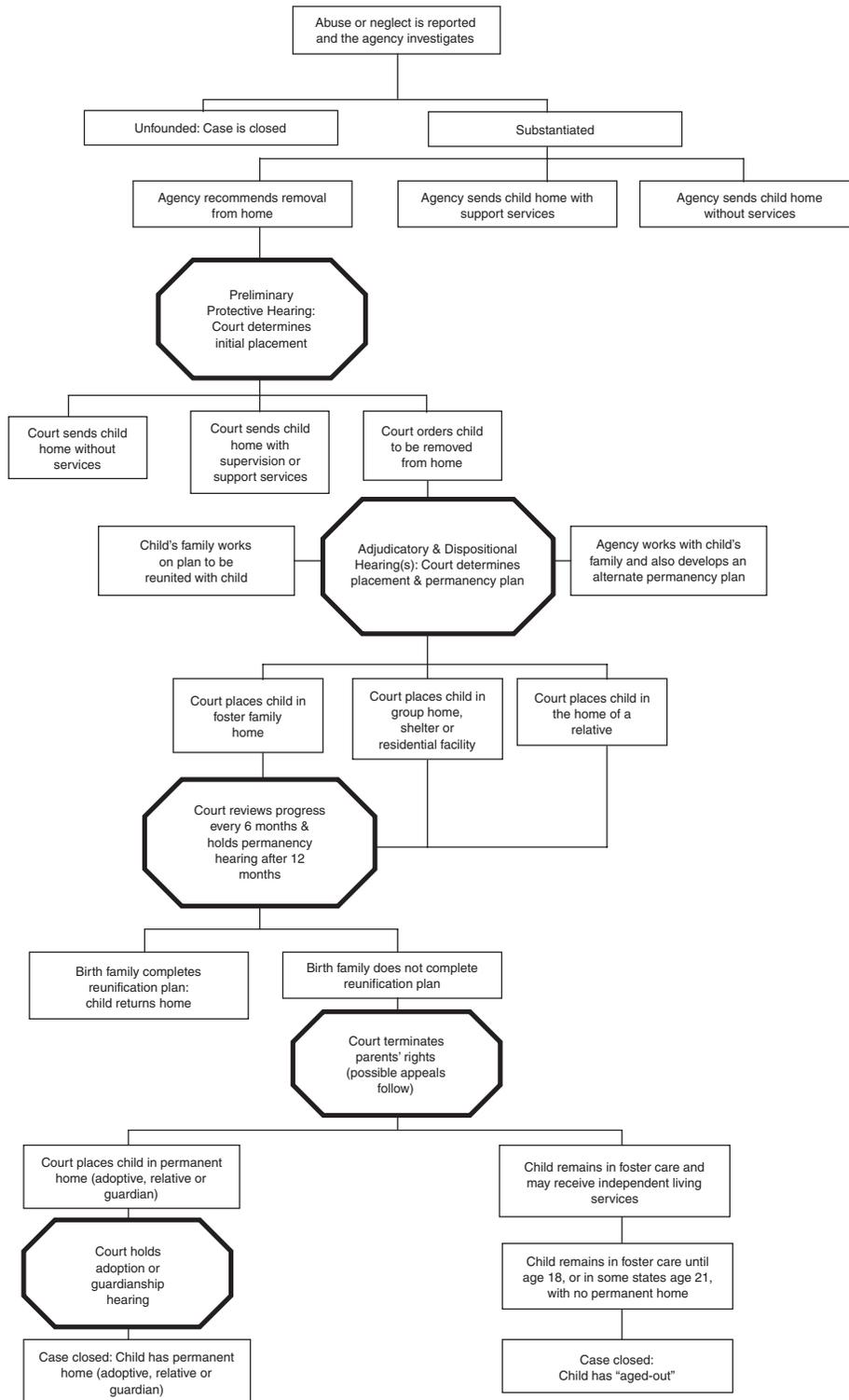
In fact, in 2001, 57 percent of the youth exiting foster care were reunified with one or both of their parents, although about one-third of these youth return to foster care within three years. Twenty-one percent were placed in guardianship or adopted, and 10 percent went to live with relatives other than their parents.

Prior to a permanent placement or exiting foster care, foster youth are placed either in a foster family home (48 percent), the home of a relative (24 percent), or another setting such as a group home or residential psychiatric care facility. Foster family homes must be state licensed, and foster parents receive a stipend to cover room, board, and clothing expenses for the foster youth, and in many cases access to Medicaid coverage is available. There is a preference in federal law for placement of foster youth with relatives who receive stipends only if they are licensed foster care providers.

⁶ Barbara Brotman, “Memoirs give voice to injured children: Stories of violence, hunger and despair offer insights into life as a foster child,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 2005.

The following chart provides a graphic representation of the typical progress a youth makes through a state child welfare system.

Figure 1. A Child’s Journey through the Child Welfare System



Source: Sue Badeau and Sarah Gesiriech, *A Child's Journey Through the Child Welfare System* (Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004).

The foster care system was created to provide a temporary status while a permanent placement for maltreated youth is being arranged. However, foster youth in fact stay in care for a mean and median length of time of 31 and 18 months respectively, and 16 percent are in foster care for five or more years.⁷ On average, foster youth have three residential placements, and there are anecdotal reports of 10, 20, or even more placements.⁸ Here are two examples of such horror stories:

Sidney entered the foster care system as an infant. . . . Now a young woman, she looks back on 54 group homes, three foster home placements and four emergency shelters.⁹

Sinora, a former foster youth, reports: “I entered the foster care system at age 13. . . . For over 3 years, I was shuffled around between 13 foster homes, group homes, and even a mental health facility.¹⁰

From the point of view of the foster youth, the system involves being removed from home and parents by strange adults and placed with new temporary “parents” with their own rules and lifestyles. It also often means being separated from siblings, friends, neighborhood, and school and needing to make dramatic adjustments. For most foster youth this process of separation and readjustments occurs multiple times. The only permanent features of the lives of many foster youth are living out of a suitcase or plastic trash bags and repeating their “story” to new people. Their lives are uncertain and insecure. Decisions about the youth’s future are made by strangers in the child protective service or child welfare agencies and courts who speak in their professional jargon. The agencies and courts follow their own regulations and timetables, and foster youth rarely receive an explanation about what is happening or why. The foster youth often feel caught in “the system” that is highly impersonal and sometimes irrational and degrading.¹¹ Needless to say this is a bewildering, disorienting, and upsetting experience.

One foster youth reports: “I remember vividly just sitting outside the courthouse. . . my birth mother crying. And then suddenly, I was living somewhere else, in some house I didn’t know. No one told me anything. For five years, no one told me anything.”¹²

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, *The AFCARS Report, #10* (August, 2004).

⁸ The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care* (Washington, DC: 2004) p. 9. The average number of placements for the foster youth who are the focus of this report, those over the age of 13, is probably higher. It is more difficult to find permanent placements outside of the foster care system for older foster youth. Therefore, they tend to stay in foster care for longer periods than the overall average stay. And, the “longer children remain in care, the more placements they are likely to have.” *Foster Care Today*, p. 3.

⁹ National Conference of State Legislatures, “Life After Foster Care,” October/November 2004 retrieved March 9, 2005 from http://www.ncsl.org/programs/pubsSLmag/2004/04SLOctNov_Fostercare.htm. The highest number of reported placements encountered in the research for this report was 71. Anne K. Walters, “Helping Foster Children Feel at Home in College,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 12, 2005, p. A21.

¹⁰ Child Welfare League of America, *A Family’s Guide to the Child Welfare System* (Washington, DC: 2004) p. 73.

¹¹ Most Americans, who have not served in the military or spent time in prison, have probably only experienced being trapped in “the system” if they spent time in a hospital where people are often treated like objects, and treatment is administered by a parade of strangers who offer minimal explanations in their professional jargon.

¹² Gloria Hochman, Anndee Hochman, and Jennifer Miller, *Foster Care: Voices from the Inside* (Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004) p. 2.

By definition foster youth have been subject to two traumatic experiences. First, they have suffered the abuse or neglect that brought their family to the attention of social service, law enforcement, and judicial agencies. Second, they have been suddenly removed from their family by strangers, often with little or no explanation and under unpleasant circumstances. Some foster youth are traumatized for a third time by the treatment they receive while in the foster care system—frequent changes in foster care placements that disrupt relationships with adults, peers, and schools; inadequate services and supervision from child welfare agencies and courts; and additional maltreatment.

This report assumes that those who have spent a significant time (at least one year) in foster care between ages 13 and 18 are likely to be seriously affected by the experience in ways that create unique barriers to higher education opportunities. The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care noted that the “turbulence and uncertainty in childhood (of foster care) can *have lasting consequences*. Children who spend many years in multiple foster homes are substantially more likely than other children to face emotional, behavioral, and academic challenges.”¹³ The 2003 report of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being reported that children who had spent at least one year in foster care “had *lasting or recurring* physical or mental health problems . . . and low social skills, low daily living skills, and a high degree of behavior problems.”¹⁴

Approximately 35,000–40,000 foster youth reach age 18 each year.¹⁵ An important subgroup within the foster youth population is those who are *in foster care* when they reach age 18. About 20,000 foster youth are in this group who “age-out” of foster care each year. Having become adults in the eyes of the law, they no longer have a legal right to foster care and in many cases are literally “on their own.”¹⁶

These foster youth often have received some preparation for independence and for the transition out of foster care, and some continue to receive independent living services usually until age 21 through federal, state, and private programs. However, as they move directly from the foster care system to emancipation, they face exceptional challenges in meeting the demands of adulthood including participating in higher education. These foster youth who age-out have been the frequent subject of attention in newspapers, periodicals and academic research as well as the object of policy initiatives such as the federal Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. However, it is important to keep in mind that those who age-out of foster care are only about half of the group of foster youth whose opportunities for higher education have been impaired in their passage through the foster care system.

At any time, there are approximately 300,000 American youth between the ages of 18 and 25 who spent at least one year in foster care after age 13. Further, about 150,000 of these foster youth are college-qualified, that is they have graduated from high school, and of

¹³ *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care*, pp. 9, 11 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Reported in U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *2004 Green Book*, p. 11–90 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ The sources for the data presented in this paragraph and the ones that follow are detailed in Chapter 1. In specific, the estimate of 35,000–40,000 foster youth reaching age 18 each year is the total number of foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old cohort (305,000) divided by the eight years of that cohort.

¹⁶ See, Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

these college qualified foster youth about 30,000 are attending postsecondary education. The rate at which foster youth complete high school (50 percent) is significantly below the rate at which their peers complete high school (70 percent). In addition, the rate at which college-qualified foster youth attend postsecondary education (20 percent) is substantially below the rate at which their peers attend postsecondary education (60 percent). If foster youth completed high school and attended postsecondary education at the same rate as their peers, nearly 100,000 additional foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old age group would be attending higher education. This is the size of the gap in opportunity for higher education between foster youth and their peers. This is also the magnitude of the policy problem that this country faces to equalize opportunities for foster youth compared with those of their peers.

The first chapter of this report spells out in more detail the characteristics of the foster youth population. The report then examines the specific barriers to higher education opportunity faced by foster youth and recommends steps that can be taken to lower or eliminate those barriers. In particular, foster youth face tremendous obstacles from their lack of adult skills and competencies, mental and emotional problems, lack of adequate academic preparation in high school and poverty that hinder their higher education opportunities.

The goal of this report is to improve and expand the opportunities for higher education available to foster youth. Therefore, the report focuses on the barriers to higher education faced by these youth many of whom, because of the obstacles, do not become college qualified, do not gain access to higher education, and do not complete a degree. This focus on the hurdles faced by foster youth and the negative educational experience and outcomes of many should not obscure the educational success of others. Many foster youth face the challenges of life in the system and succeed academically. Many are well-adjusted, employed, and living “normal” family lives. They have in some cases achieved their “normalcy” through heroic strength of character, resilience, and perseverance. These successes should not go unnoticed and unacknowledged while attention is focused on the work that is yet to be done to provide a better life for all foster youth.

CHAPTER 1:

Characteristics of Foster Youth

This chapter provides an overview of the children and youth in foster care in the United States, including patterns of race/ethnicity, age, time spent in foster care, foster care placement, and exit destinations upon leaving foster care. The overview is followed by a discussion of the foster youth cohort, those foster youth who have aged-out of care and those who have spent at least 12 months in care between the ages of 13 and 20. The final section outlines the educational outcomes for foster youth, examining high school diploma achievement and rates of college attendance and graduation.

Unfortunately, few of the data sources measure outcomes in ways that can be directly compared. For example, high school graduation rates greatly depend on whether former foster youth are interviewed six months or six years out of foster care. In addition, when youths emancipate or “age-out” of foster care, states are no longer required to track them.¹⁷ As a result, there is little comprehensive or systematic research on these young adults. The last nationwide survey examining foster youth post-emancipation was published in 1990.¹⁸ Because of these limitations, this report relies heavily on state and regional data sources.

The Foster Care Population

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 72 million children, defined as the population under age 18, living in the United States in March 2002. Within this population, nearly three million, or 4 percent, of those under age 18 are living with neither a mother nor a father present.

The data reported in Table 1 are provided to the Census Bureau by householders who respond to surveys. These respondents cannot be expected to accurately report on the number of “foster children” in households in the legal sense of children who are wards of the state. This is the case because the term “foster children” has both everyday common meanings as well as a specific legal meaning.¹⁹ Therefore, it is highly likely that each of the four subcategories of children “Living with neither parent” in Table 1 includes both foster children in the legal sense as well as youth outside of the foster care system who are also not living with their parents.

¹⁷ A youth emancipates from foster care “when the child reaches the age of majority by virtue of age, marriage, or judicial determination and leaves the foster care system.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Annual Performance Plans and Reports, retrieved May 4, 2005 from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/acf_perfplan/ann_per/apr2005/apr2005pdf.

¹⁸ Westat, Inc., *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth, Phase 1, Final Report*, (Rockville, MD: 1990).

¹⁹ Legally, youth in foster care are children (under age 18) who are provided 24-hour substitute care away from their parent(s) and guardian(s) and for whom a state agency has placement and care responsibility. They are often referred to as “wards of the court” or “wards of the state.” See note 4 in the Introduction.

Table 1. Number of children under 18 years old by family structure: March 2002

Family Structure	Number of Children (under 18 years-old)
All Children	72.3 Million
Living with Two Parents	49.7 Million
Living with Mother Only	16.5 Million
Living with Father Only	3.3 Million
Living with neither Parent	2.9 Million
Living with Grandparent[s]	1.3 Million
Living with Other Relative[s]	0.8 Million
Living with a Non-Relative[s]	0.6 Million
Foster Children	0.2 Million

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002 (Washington, DC: Fields, 2003) Table 1, p. 2.

The most complete source of national data about foster children in the legal sense is the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). This system semi-annually collects data from state child welfare agencies that are reported to the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. According to AFCARS, there were about half a million children in legal foster care in 2002.²⁰

Subtracting the half a million foster children identified in AFCARS from the 2.9 million children living with neither parent identified by the Census Bureau (reported in Table 1) yields 2.4 million children who are not living with a parent and are not in foster care.²¹ The data in Table 1 suggest that about two-thirds of these youth are living with relatives, most with a grandparent(s). This arrangement is called private kinship care. This report focuses on the youth living without a parent and living under the foster care system. These youth are placed with a foster family headed by a non-relative (formal foster care), a foster family headed by a relative (kinship foster care), or elsewhere.²²

Approximately 800,000 youth were in foster care at some point during FY 2003.²³ On September 30, 2003 (the end date of FY 2003), there were 523,000 youth in foster care.²⁴ Both of these numbers are used to describe the size of the foster care population, although the larger number more accurately portrays the magnitude of the social impact of the foster care system. From the point of view of public agencies such as the juvenile courts, law enforcement departments, child welfare bureaus, and public schools and the public policies that guide them, the total number of foster youth contacted during the course of a year seems more relevant than the number of foster youth who were in care on single specific date.

²⁰ "The AFCARS Report #9" (Preliminary FY 2002 Estimates as of August 2004), retrieved August 2, 2005 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/publications/afcars.htm>. This estimate from AFCARS refers to the number of foster children at a point in time (September 30, 2002). It is comparable to the data collected by the Census Bureau, which also refers to a point in time (March 2002).

²¹ Since AFCARS data are more reliable than Census data for counting foster youth, this provides a better estimate of children who are not living with parents but are not in foster care.

²² The taxonomy of living arrangements for youth who are not living with their parents (private kinship care, formal foster care, and kinship foster care) is developed in Rob Geen, "The Evolution of Kinship Care Policy and Practice," *Future of Children*, v. 14, no. 1 (Winter 2004).

²³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Trends in Foster Care and Adoption" retrieved on August 1, 2005 from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/publications/afcars_stats.htm. An individual child is counted only once for the year.

²⁴ "The AFCARS Report #10" (Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005), retrieved August 2, 2005 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/publications/afcars.htm>.

PRIVATE KINSHIP CARE

There is a very sizeable group of youth who are not living with either of their biological parents, who are not in the foster care system, but who are living with a relative. There were about two million such youth in the 2000 census, about four times the number of foster youth.

These youth, like foster youth, lack the direct connection to a biological parent. Some of these youth are orphans, but most have parents who are either unable or unwilling to care for them. These youth are most often cared for by a grandmother, and others are cared for by aunts, uncles, siblings, godparents, or family friends. This arrangement is known as “private kinship care.” The kinship caregivers may be eligible for public assistance such as Medicaid health insurance coverage, food stamps, child care subsidies, and housing assistance for the youth in their care.

The situation of youth in private kinship care is fundamentally different from the situation of foster youth. First, the private kinship care relationship is not the result of government action. These youth were not, for example, placed with their grandmother by a public agency. Second, the private kinship care is not sanctioned by the government, and these youth are not wards of the court. Third, these youth are not subject to the ongoing supervision and oversight of public agencies. Fourth, perhaps most importantly, the youth in private kinship care generally have not experienced the abuse or neglect and resulting trauma that characterizes foster youth who have come to the attention of public agencies. Because of these important differences between foster youth and youth in kinship care only the former are the subject of this report.

Youth in private kinship care are generally low-income, and their opportunities for higher education are constrained for all the reasons that higher education opportunities for low-income youth are limited. These youth may face additional hurdles to higher education opportunity because of their private kinship care living arrangement. This worthy subject for investigation is, however, beyond the scope of this report. This report addresses the impact on higher education opportunities of having spent a significant period in the foster care system (at least one year after age 12). Beyond the focus of this report are the larger issues of the negative effects of not being raised by one's biological parents.

On the subject of private kinship care, see Rob Geen, “The Evolution of Kinship Care Policy and Practice,” *Future of Children*, v. 14, no. 1 (Winter 2004); and Rob Geen, ed., *Kinship Care: Making the most of a valuable resource* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press, 2003).

Those entering foster care were split almost equally between boys (53 percent) and girls (48 percent).²⁵ Children in foster care were on average 10 years old, and the largest group (30 percent) is between ages 11 through 15.²⁶

The composition of the foster care population by race/ethnicity varies significantly from the general U.S. population. White Non-Hispanic children are underrepresented in foster care (39 percent of all foster youth compared to 61 percent in the total U.S. population). Conversely, Black Non-Hispanic children are disproportionately found in foster care (35 percent of all foster youth compared to 16 percent in the U.S.).²⁷

A major thrust of federal policy for foster youth has been to give them “permanency” in a placement outside of the foster care system. For example, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 required that states file a motion to terminate parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months in order to speed permanent placements out of

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

care.²⁸ Despite these intentions, in FY 2003 the average stay in foster care was 31 months and the median 18 months.²⁹ The length of stay in foster care was one to five months for 18 percent of these youth but five years or more for 16 percent.³⁰

Forty-six percent of the youth who are in foster care have a placement in a non-relative foster family home (formal foster care), and 23 percent are in foster homes headed by a relative (kinship foster care).³¹ The remaining foster youth are placed in various other settings including institutions and group homes.

In recent years there has been a significant growth in foster care placements with relatives.³² This reflects both a shortage of foster parents who are not relatives and a belief that kinship foster care is likely to be more stable and less traumatic since more community and family connections are maintained.

Table 2. Distribution of children in foster care by placement settings, FY 2003

Placement Settings	Percentage
Foster Family Home (Non-Relative)	46%
Foster Family Home (Relative)	23%
Institution	10%
Group Home	9%
Pre-Adoptive Home	5%
Trial Home Visit	4%
Runaway	2%
Supervised Independent Living	1%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #10 (Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005).

Of the 281,000 youth who exited foster care in FY 2003, 55 percent were reunited with their parents, 18 percent were adopted, and 11 percent went to live with other relatives. Of those exiting foster care, 8 percent (nearly 22,000) were emancipated.³³ This latter group is a major portion of the foster youth who are the subject of this report.

Table 3. Distribution of children exiting foster care by outcomes, FY 2003

Outcomes	Percentage
Reunification with Parent(s)	55%
Adoption	18%
Living with Other Relative(s)	11%
Emancipation	8%
Guardianship	4%
Transfer to Another Agency	2%
Runaway	2%
Death of Children	0%

Note: Five-hundred and seventy children died while in foster care. The percentage rounds to zero.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #10 (Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005).

²⁸ Sec. 103 of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (PL 105-89).

²⁹ The AFCARS Report # 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Kathy Barbell and Madelyn Freundlich, *Foster Care Today* (Washington, DC: Casey Family Programs, 2001) pp. 21-22.

³³ The AFCARS Report # 10.

Foster Youth Cohort Estimate

The estimate calculated for this report shows at least 300,000 people in the United States, ages 18–25, who spent at least one year in foster care after the age of 12. This group is being replenished at the rate of about 35,000 – 40,000 new entrants per year. This 18–25 cohort is important because these are crucial years for youth to be able to take advantage of opportunities for higher education. Youth who do not attend higher education during these years are much more at risk of never receiving a higher education diploma or credential. Time spent in foster care during the adolescent years (ages 13–20) has a significant impact on the development of adult competency, mental health, high school completion rates, and opportunities for higher education. Generally, experts consider one year in foster care as a “significant” experience.³⁴

The estimate was calculated through the following line of reasoning. AFCARS data from 1999–2003 indicate the number of exits from foster care, ages 13–20, who were in care at least 12 months. These numbers, as well as estimates for 1998, 2004, and 2005, are presented in Table 4. On average, 51,000 people between the ages of 13 and 20 who have spent at least one year in state custody left foster care annually. This number includes foster youth who “aged-out,” having reached an age at which they were no longer eligible for foster care services. AFCARS data reveal that about 20,000 people age-out of foster care each year.

Table 4. Estimated number of youth who exited foster care after 12 months or longer, 1998–2005

Year	Total exits (ages 13–20)	Exits due to age-out (18–20)	Exits not due to age-out (13–17)
1998	51,000	20,000	31,000
1999	47,370	20,000	27,370
2000	50,686	20,000	30,686
2001	49,220	20,000	29,220
2002	53,149	20,000	33,149
2003	54,481	20,000	34,481
2004	51,000	20,000	31,000
2005	51,000	20,000	31,000

Note: Numbers for 1998, 2004 and 2005 reflect the average of the years for which data are available.

Source: The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2005) using data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #10 (Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005).

Based on this information, in the 18–25 year old cohort (those who exited foster care between 1998 and 2005), there are 160,000 people who have aged-out of foster care. However, there is also another group of people who spent at least 12 months in foster care between the ages of 13 and 20 but who left foster care before aging-out. Those ages 18–20 who exit are assumed to be age-outs. Therefore, only children age 13–17 years old are in this latter group who left after one year but did not age-out.

A series of steps are needed to determine how many in this group are also in the 18–25 cohort in 2005. First, eliminate from each age group between 13 and 17 those who would not reach the 18–25 cohort by 2005. This can be seen graphically in Table 5. Those numbers crossed out are the children who are not old enough to be included in the 18–25 cohort. The result is 152, 313 foster youth in the 2005 cohort who did not age-out.

³⁴ Personal correspondence with Peter Pecora (February 15, 2005) noting that many of the major foster care follow-up studies focus on youth who have spent one year or more in care.

Table 5. Estimated number of children in the 2005 cohort who exited foster care before aging out, 1998-2005

Age	Year								All Years
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	
13	6,200	5,474	6,137	5,844	6,630	6,896	6,200	6,200	17,811
14	6,200	5,474	6,137	5,844	6,630	6,896	6,200	6,200	23,655
15	6,200	5,474	6,137	5,844	6,630	6,896	6,200	6,200	30,285
16	6,200	5,474	6,137	5,844	6,630	6,896	6,200	6,200	37,181
17	6,200	5,474	6,137	5,844	6,630	6,896	6,200	6,200	43,381
Totals	31,000	27,370	30,685	23,376	19,890	13,792	6,200	–	152,313

Note: The 2005 cohort includes 18 to 25-year-olds who were in foster care for at least 12 months during the ages of 13 to 17. The number of children in each age group is derived from Table 4 by dividing the number of 13 to 17-year-olds in a given year by five (the number of age groups). The crossed out numbers represent those children who did not reach 18 years of age by 2005.

Source: The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2005) using data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #10 (Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005).

However, data show that one-third of all children who leave foster care will re-enter within three years. As a result, some of the exit numbers are duplicates. When computing the number of duplicates, children ages 15–17 are excluded because on average they will not have returned to foster care before reaching age 18, which would render them ineligible for foster care services. However, the children ages 13–14 who have exited foster care may return, so one-third of them is counted from each year (1998–2001) in that age group as a duplicated count. This is depicted in Table 6. In turn, the number of children who exited foster care before aging-out is reduced by 13,818. Thus, there are about 139,495 (152,313 minus 13,818) unduplicated youth in the foster youth cohort who did not age-out of foster care.

Table 6. Estimated number of youth in the 2005, 18 to 25-year-old cohort who returned to foster care and re-exited (duplicates)

Age	Year first exited (year re-entered)				All Years
	1998 (2001)	1999 (2002)	2000 (2003)	2001 (2004)	
13-year-olds	2,066	1,824	2,045	–	5,935
14-year-olds	2,066	1,824	2,025	1,948	7,883
Total	4,132	3,648	4,090	1,948	13,818

Note: In 2001, only 14-year-olds are included because 13-year-olds will not be 18 years of age by 2005. Starting in 2002, both 13 and 14-year-olds will be too young to be included in the 2005 cohort of 18 to 25-year-olds. Since foster youth stay an average of three years in foster care, duplicates only need to be accounted for once.

Source: The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2005) using data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #10 (Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005).

Based on these estimates, the total number in the foster youth cohort, which is the target population of this report, is the sum of the number who aged-out (160,000) plus the number who were in care for at least a year after age 12 but who left care before aging-out (139,495), which is 299,495 or about 300,000.

Foster Youth Educational Attainment

Since, as noted above, there is little comprehensive nationwide research on the educational attainment of foster youth, this study relies on state and regional data sources. Table 7 summarizes various studies of high school completion and college attendance rates among foster youth. The data from these different state and regional studies vary significantly because of the different sample sizes, sample selection criteria, time periods covered, and

lengths of time between the surveys and follow-up interviews. Nevertheless, a consistent pattern of high school completion rates was found among foster youth. Foster youth complete high school at a significantly lower rate than their peers. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the overall average high school graduation rate in recent years among 17-year-olds has been stable at about 70 percent.³⁵ Based on the studies summarized in Table 7, the average rate for high school completion among foster youth is estimated as 50 percent.³⁶ Emphasis was placed on the rate of “on-time” graduation from high school by age 18 since this is the population most directly affected by time spent in foster care, and this is the group entering the 18 to 25-year-old cohort whose opportunities for higher education have been selected as the unit of analysis for this report.

As noted above, there are about 300,000 in the foster youth cohort, those aged 18 to 25 who spent at least 12 months in care after the age of 12 and those who aged-out of foster care. Therefore, the estimate of the foster youth who are eligible for postsecondary education (i.e. high school graduates) is 150,000.

Based on the research presented in Table 7, the college attendance rate for foster youth is approximately 20 percent of those who graduate from high school. Between 1990 and 2001, about 60 percent of high school graduates in the U.S. enrolled in college.³⁷ If those in the foster youth cohort graduated from high school and attended college at the same rate as their peers about 100,000 more foster youth would attend college compared to the number that now attend.³⁸ This is one reasonable measure of the gap in opportunities for higher education between foster youth and their peers.

Not surprisingly the rate of college completion or degree attainment is also significantly lower for foster youth compared to their peers. Here the data are even older and more fragmentary than the studies summarized in Table 7. Four studies from the 1980s reported college degree completion rates for foster youth ranging from “less than 1%” to 5.4 percent.³⁹ In comparison, in 1990 more than 20 percent of all persons in the U.S. 25 years old and older had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher.⁴⁰ Of course, college completion is not only defined by attainment of a B.A. degree. Postsecondary institutions award a large variety of other educational degrees and certificates particularly in community colleges and technical schools. Unfortunately, there is very little data describing the level of attainment of these credentials by foster youth for comparison to their peers.

³⁵ U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004) Table 102.

³⁶ This rate of high school degree completion may in fact overstate the educational attainment of foster youth since some studies indicate that a substantially greater proportion of foster youth who graduated from high school compared to their peers received a GED. While about 6 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds completed high school through the GED (*Digest of Education Statistics 2003*, Table 106), the rate for foster youth is as high as 32 or 29 percent in studies reported in Table 7. Successfully completing the General Educational Development (GED) battery of tests is widely recognized as the equivalent of getting a high school diploma. However, some research suggests that the GED is an inferior credential because it does not indicate a level of in-depth knowledge or lead to the equivalent lifetime earnings compared to a high school diploma. See, Bettina Lankard Brown, “Is the GED a Valuable Credential,” *ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education* (2000). One study goes so far as to say that “GED recipients are the functional equivalents of drop-outs.” Youth Advocacy Center, *The Future for Teens in Foster Care* (NY: 2001) note 55, p. 55.

³⁷ *Digest of Education Statistics 2003*, Table 186.

³⁸ This is derived by straightforward arithmetic as follows: $[0.7 \text{ (rate of U.S. high school graduation)} \times 0.6 \text{ (U.S. rate of college attendance for high school graduates)} \times 300,000]$ minus $[0.5 \text{ (rate of foster youth high school graduation)} \times 0.2 \text{ (rate of foster youth college attendance for high school graduates)} \times 300,000] = 126,000$ minus $30,000 = 96,000$ or about 100,000.

³⁹ Peter Pecora et al, *Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study* (Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs, 2003) p. 30.

⁴⁰ *Digest of Education Statistics 2003*, Table 12. The same table indicates that this percentage is now about 24 percent.

Table 7. Comparison of available studies measuring the educational attainment of foster youth

	Westat (.1990) ¹	Maine (.1999) ²	Missouri (.1999) ³	Wisconsin (2001) ⁴	Washington (2001) ⁵
Sample Size (response rate)	1646	134 (24%)	477 (53%)	Wave 1 ^b 141 (95%) Wave 2 ^c 113 (80%)	891
Characteristics of Sample	Youth age 16 or older, discharged from foster care between January 1, 1987 and July 31, 1998, in care at least one month.	Youth age 14-21, living in specific Maine counties. Largest single age group was 17 years old (26% of sample).	Youth whose alternative care case closed between October 1, 1992 and September 30, 1993; alternative care case opened six months or longer at time of case closing; and who were age 17 or older at time of case closing.	Youth in out-of-home care at least 18 months, not developmentally disabled, represent 42 counties in Wisconsin.	Used cohorts of 11th grade students who took standardized assessment tests during the 1997-98 and 1998-99 school years. Study measured foster youth who graduated high school on time.
Demographics					
Female	57%	56%	66%	57%	40%
Caucasian	61%	90%	77%	65%	72%
African American	30%		22%	27%	11%
American Indian	1%	4%		6%	7%
Asian	1%			5%	5%
Hispanic	4%				
Other		7%	1%	2%	
Educational Aspirations					
Enter College		74%		79%	38%
Graduate college				63%	
Educational Attainment					
Failed to complete at least one grade (during K-12)	19%	43%		30%	15%
Graduated High School	37%		33%		50% ^d
Received GED			6%		
Without diploma or GED	63%				
Entered College	1%	24% ^a			
2-year					
4-year					

(Continued on next page.)

Table 7. Comparison of available studies measuring the educational attainment of foster youth (Continued)

	Midwestern County (2003) ⁶		Idaho (2004) ⁷				Midwest Study (2004, 2005) ^{8,9}		Northwest (2005) ¹⁰
	Sample Size (response rate)	1996	1997	1998	2000	2001	Wave 1 ^e	Wave 2 ^f	
Characteristics of Sample	262 Youth were eligible if they were between 15 and 19 years old and were currently in out-of-home care or had lived in an out-of-home placement for at least one day since their 16th birthday.	20 Youth age 18 and over who exited foster care within 30 days of the fiscal year reported under the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's jurisdiction for the fiscal years 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, and 2002, who are eligible for Title IV-E Independent Living grant funded services, regardless of whether payments are being made.	33 30	25 25	32 32	40 40	732 (95.4%) Youth age 17 or 18 while in out-of-home care, in care for at least 1 year prior to 17th birthday. Youth in study were 17 years old and still under jurisdiction of state child welfare system.	736 (82%) Youth age 19 and who were eligible for inclusion in the first wave of data collection, among which 47% were still in care while 53% had been discharged.	659 (75.7%) Adults age 20-33, who have been placed in family foster care between 1988 and 1998, and have spent 12 or more continuous months in family-based foster care between the age of 14 and 18 during those years and have turned 18 by September 30, 1998.
Demographics									
Female	50%	70%	70%	56%	63%	73%	51%	54%	60%
Caucasian	31%	85%	91%	100%	91%	90%	31%	31%	46%
African American	60%		3%				57%	57%	21%
American Indian					6%	5%	1%	1%	
Asian							0.5%	0.5%	
Hispanic		15%	6%		3%	5%		8%	11%
Other	1%						10%	2%	23%
Educational Aspirations									
Enter College	70%						13%		
Graduate college	19%						49%		
Educational Attainment									
Failed to complete at least one grade (during K-12)							37%		
Graduated High School		20%	42%	56%	31%	20%		58%	56%
Received GED		20%	21%	32%	6%	25%		5%	29%
Without diploma or GED								37%	
Entered College							6%		43%
2-year								17%	
4-year								7%	

(Notes on following page.)

Notes to Table 7.

Blanks = 0%, or not available.

1. Westat, Inc., *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care: Independent Living Programs for Youth, Phase 1, Final Report*, (Rockville, MD: 1990).
2. Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service. *Maine Study on Improving the Educational Outcomes for Children in Care*. (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999).
3. J. Curtis McMillen, & Jayne Tucker, *The Status of Older Adolescents at Exit from Out-of-Home Care*. (Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America, 1999).
4. Mark E. Courtney, Irving Piliavin, Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, & Ande Nesmith, *Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: A Longitudinal View of Youth Leaving Care*. (Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America, 2001).
5. Mason Burley, & Mina Halpern, *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth: Achievement and Graduation Outcomes for Children in State Care*. (Seattle, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2001).
6. Curtis McMillen, Wendy Auslander, Diane Elze, Tony White, & Ronald Thompson, *Educational Experiences and Aspirations of Older Youth in Foster Care*. (Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America, 2003).
7. Brian L. Christenson. *Youth Exiting Foster Care: Efficacy of Independent Living Services in the State of Idaho*. (Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington University, 2004).
8. Mark E. Courtney, Sherri Terao, & Noel Bost, *Midwest Evaluation for the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*. (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2004).
9. Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth, Tom Keller, Judy Havlicek, & Noel Bost, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19*. (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall, Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2005).
10. Peter Pecora, et al. *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. (Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs, 2005).
 - a. This number applies to V-9 youth (Youth 18 years and older with a voluntary DHS agreement).
 - b. Wave 1 of the survey was administered while youth ages 17-18 still lived in out-of-home care.
 - c. Wave 2 of the survey was administered when youth had been out of care 12-18 months.
 - d. This percentage refers only to those 11th graders who enrolled in 12th grade.
 - e. Wave 1 interviews were administered while youth ages 17-18 still lived in out-of-home care.
 - f. Wave 2 interviews occurred about 22 months after Wave 1 interviews. 47% were still in care while the remainder had been discharged.

CHAPTER 2:

Adult Life Skills

The education of foster youth is a matter of public interest as well as of personal concern to the foster youth themselves. The nation benefits by increasing the level of education of its citizens. Economic productivity and growth increase. The workforce is more flexible and able to more efficiently meet labor market demands. Tax revenue increases and reliance on government services decreases. Crime rates decline and the quality of democratic participation improves. Perhaps most importantly, the society is more fair and just if its citizens have educational opportunities and can progress based on their talents and merit. From the point of view of the individual, the more education one receives the higher one's likely future income becomes. More education is also associated with lower unemployment, better health, longer life, safer and more satisfying employment, and higher social status.⁴¹

In the current post-industrial and knowledge-based economy, postsecondary education has become the ticket to full participation in the economic, social, and political life of the nation and attainment of the American Dream, a prosperous middle-class life. Many argue that a bachelor's degree is as necessary now as a high school diploma was a few decades ago.⁴² The link between educational attainment and joining the American mainstream is as true for foster youth as it is for others.

Participation in higher education is fundamentally different from participation in elementary and secondary education. Simply put, elementary and secondary education is an activity of childhood while higher education is an activity of adulthood. Elementary and secondary education is compulsory, which implies that only in extreme circumstances are students excluded or rejected from public education. Higher education, on the other hand, is voluntary. Depending on a student's ability to meet an institution's standards for admission and academic progress, many are excluded from attendance or are not allowed to continue along the way. Beyond academic preparation, in higher education it is assumed that students have basic adult competencies. This means that students are expected to manage their lives including being responsible for housing, feeding and clothing themselves, and for controlling their finances, health care, and transportation. Students in higher education are expected to be able to live and function independently. It is taken for granted that they can advocate on their own behalf and that they have the social, organizational, and communications skills necessary to navigate in the world. In short,

⁴¹ See, for example, Institute for Higher Education Policy and Scholarship America, *Investing in America's Future: Why Student Aid Pays Off for Society and Individuals* (Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2004) pp. 5-9; and Institute for Higher Education Policy, *The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education* (Washington, DC: 2005).

⁴² *Ibid.* and Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers, *Standards for What?: The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2003).

they are assumed to possess a significant level of self-sufficiency and maturity. On the other hand, in elementary and secondary education a student is a minor and a dependent who is, for the most part, cared for by others rather than expected to care for himself or herself.

In the normal course of events, a child in society gains the skills and competencies required of an adult by learning from and emulating those who are already adults, particularly those with whom the youth has a sustained, close, and caring relationship. This means, in most cases, that they learn adult skills by imitating their parents.

**... vital familial connections
are replaced by relationships
with a kaleidoscope
of strangers ...**

Foster youth have by definition had the most important bond with adults broken or severely interrupted, the tie between parents and children. In addition, their relationship with siblings and relatives, especially those who are older, has often been broken or compromised. Therefore, foster youth often do not develop the self-sufficiency and maturity essential for access to and success in higher education. They often do not receive the emotional, moral, and social support that would underpin their transition to adulthood and sustain them in their early adult years. This is a critical barrier to higher education opportunities faced by foster youth. For these youth vital familial connections are replaced by relationships with a kaleidoscope of strangers—law enforcement officers, social workers, judges, teachers, counselors, and foster parents.

Social workers have frontline responsibility for the welfare of foster youth. They often have caseloads in excess of recommended levels. This means that social workers do not have the time to develop close and caring relationships with foster youth. It also means that they suffer from high levels of job stress and burnout and from a high rate of turnover.⁴³ There is an annual turnover rate of 20 percent in public agencies and 40 percent in private agencies for child welfare workers.⁴⁴ This implies a diminished likelihood of long-term relationships between social workers and foster youth.

In addition, research indicates that professional education in social work is directly related to the quality of outcomes for foster youth. Yet only about a quarter of social workers have professional social work training and only about 10 percent have graduate degrees in social work.⁴⁵

Low salaries also contribute to the high turnover and the low level of professional training of social workers. A study classified social workers as “one of the five worst paying professional jobs in the country with an average annual starting salary of only \$22,000.”⁴⁶ Obviously, foster youth would have a better chance of maturing and becoming independent adults if trained social workers could spend more time with them over a sustained period. Higher levels of pay and training and lower case loads for social workers could make this more possible.

⁴³ Gloria Hochman, Anndee Hochman, and Jennifer Miller, *Foster Care: Voices from the Inside* (Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004) pp. 17-20.

⁴⁴ Kathy Barbell and Madelyn Freundlich, *Foster Care Today* (Washington, DC: Casey Family Programs, 2001) p. 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26

⁴⁶ Mary Bissell and Jess McDonald, “Dedicated, Overworked, Underfunded; Child-Welfare Workers,” *The Miami Herald*, September 5, 2005; *Foster Care: Voices from the Inside*, p.19; and Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care* (Washington, DC: 2004) pp. 11, 31-32.

Foster parents are also on the frontline of responsibility for foster youth. About three quarters of foster youth are placed with a foster family while in foster care.⁴⁷ Foster care was originally intended to be a temporary status, and foster parents were intended to largely serve in the role of short-term caregivers, “babysitters.” However, foster youth, in fact, stay in care for a mean and median length of time of 31 and 18 months respectively, and on average, foster youth have three placements.⁴⁸ Thus, with longer stays in foster care, particularly for adolescents, the expectations for foster parents have grown to include an important role in nurturing foster youth. However, since foster youth change placements on average every six to 10 months there is scarcely enough time to develop sustained and caring relationships between foster parents and foster youth or for foster parents to help foster youth to become independent adults. Only about a third of foster care alumni in a recent study reported that they received “a lot” of “overall helpfulness” from their foster parents.⁴⁹

In addition, there is an increasing shortage of licensed foster care homes.

In addition, there is an increasing shortage of licensed foster care homes. This shortage is caused in part by increasing levels of responsibility for foster parents and a lack of support and responsiveness from child welfare agencies. Also, the increasing employment outside the home of women who could otherwise become foster parents and modest stipends have impaired the recruitment of foster families. This results in an increasing number of foster care placements in group homes or institutions, particularly for adolescent foster youth who stay in foster care for long periods.⁵⁰ Therefore, whatever nurturing and support foster youth can obtain in foster homes is being further diminished.

With respect to high school counselors “there are three times (and up to 50 times) as many students assigned to each of those full- and part-time counselors as what the profession believes is appropriate.”⁵¹ Foster youth are disproportionately students of color and low-income, and the schools that serve such students have the highest ratios of students to counselors. Thus, another potential source of adult mentoring and nurturing for foster youth is stretched too thin to offer the guidance and support needed by foster youth. This situation is compounded by the frequency of changes in placement for foster youth, which are often accompanied by changes in school. Thus, any relationships with counselors (or teachers) that are established also are likely to be relatively short rather than sustained.

In sum, foster youth generally lack sustained relationships with caring adults that would prepare them to be independent adults generally and, in particular, that would enable them to undertake the adult responsibilities that are inherent in higher education. In a recent study of foster care alumni, less than half of them reported being “mentored while

⁴⁷ Half of foster youth are placed with an unrelated foster family and a quarter are placed with relatives. Sue Badeau and Sarah Gesiriech, *A Child's Journey Through the Child Welfare System*, (Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004) pp. 5-6.

⁴⁸ AFCARS #10, *Fostering the Future*, p. 9. A study of foster youth in Maine reported a median number of four placements and a range of placements of one to 49. Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, *Maine Study on Improving the Educational Outcomes for Children in Care* (Portland, ME: 1999) p. 10.

⁴⁹ Casey Family Programs, *Improving Family Foster Care: Finding from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study* (Seattle, WA: 2005) p. 31.

⁵⁰ *Fostering the Future*, p. 11 and *Foster Care Today*, pp. 19-20.

⁵¹ Patricia M. McDonough, “Counseling and College Counseling in America's High Schools” retrieved July 20, 2005 from www.nacac.com/downloads/p2.counseling.pdf.

growing up.”⁵² This lack of “connectedness” with caring adults inhibits the healthy development of adult competency.⁵³ Former foster youth who participated in focus group discussions reported “that they often felt no connection with anyone and had no sense of even one person on whom they could count.”⁵⁴ Government programs at the federal and state level have been enacted and private sector efforts launched to fill this gap caused by the absence of parents and other adult mentors. These efforts are generically called “independent living” programs.

Federal, state, and private sector independent living programs generally aim to achieve three outcomes—life skills, education, and employment. The discussion that follows will consider these independent living programs generally and their life skills

... research during the early 1980s indicated that a significant number of the homeless population were youth who had aged-out of foster care.

component in particular. Life skills are the markers of maturity and self-sufficiency that foster youth should have attained in the normal course of being raised as members of a family headed by caring adults. As noted above, these life skills are essential for success in higher education where it is assumed that students possess a significant level of adult competencies. The education component of independent living programs will be discussed in the Chapters 4 and 5 in the context of the academic and financial barriers to higher education opportunities faced by foster youth.⁵⁵

A federal independent living program for foster youth was enacted in 1986 in part because research during the early 1980s indicated that a significant number of the homeless population were youth who had aged-out of foster care.⁵⁶ This program has been extended and expanded several times and attained its current form with the 1999 enactment of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.⁵⁷

The purpose of the Chafee program is to provide services to youth who are likely to age-out of foster care at age 18 to enable them to “make the transition to self-sufficiency.”⁵⁸ These services are explicitly designed to compensate for the lack of sustained adult upbringing by providing “personal and emotional support to children aging out of foster care through mentors and the promotion of interactions with dedicated adults.”⁵⁹ In particular, program services are to provide daily living skills, facilitate attainment of a high school diploma and the transition to postsecondary education and training, and help foster youth obtain employment. Chafee program services may be provided to youth who have aged-out of foster care until age 21 to

⁵² *Improving Family Foster Care*, p. 31.

⁵³ Sherri Seyfried, Peter Pecora, A. Chris Downs, Phyllis Levine and John Emerson, “Assessing the Educational Outcomes of Children in Long-Term Foster Care: First Findings,” *School Social Work Journal*, v. 24, no. 2 (2000) pp. 8-10.

⁵⁴ *Foster Care: Voices from the Inside*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ The employment component of independent living programs will not be discussed separately in this report. For 16 to 21 year olds, who are the target of most independent living programs, employment is generally an alternative to higher education rather than part of the path to higher education.

⁵⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *2004 Green Book*, p. 11-47.

⁵⁷ This program is Section 477 of Part E of Title IV of the Social Security Act. It was named after the former Republican Senator from Rhode Island, and it will be referred to hereafter as the Chafee program.

⁵⁸ Sec. 477(a)(1).

⁵⁹ Sec. 477(a)(4).

help them make the “transition from adolescence to adulthood.”⁶⁰ To achieve the program purposes \$140 million per year is provided to the states.⁶¹ The amounts received by states in FY 2004 ranged from the guaranteed minimum of \$500,000 to \$26 million for California. The largest number of states received amounts in the range of \$1 – \$5 million.⁶²

The statute explicitly refers to money provided to the states as “flexible funding” and permits funds to be used by the states “in any manner that is reasonably calculated to accomplish the purposes” of the program.⁶³ Thus, the Chafee program is designed and carried out on a state by state basis.⁶⁴

All 50 states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico participate in the Chafee program. Program funds are used to provide independent living programs in general and life skills in particular for foster youth. Services are delivered directly by state, county, or local child welfare agencies or through grants to for-profit or nonprofit private agencies such as the YMCA or Big Brothers Big Sisters. In addition, these public and private agencies provide additional independent living and life skills programming using other public and private sources of funds.⁶⁵ There are no analyses of the federal, state, and private shares of the spending for independent living programs.⁶⁶ However, it is fair to say that the major share of the funding for these programs is federal.⁶⁷

... the Chafee program is designed and carried out on a state by state basis.

Independent living programs to help provide life skills to foster youth vary widely in the types of services and assistance provided, the service delivery agency (public, private, or a combination), the delivery method (e.g. classroom-based versus experiential), and the degree to which services are individualized or generic.⁶⁸ The specific life skills services are

⁶⁰ Sec. 477(a)(5). States may also extend Medicaid eligibility to these youth between ages 18 and 21.

⁶¹ These funds are a capped entitlement meaning that the \$140 million per year is guaranteed as long as the law is not changed, but there is not an open-ended commitment to pay for an unlimited amount of state independent living services. Individual states receive an allotment from the \$140 million based on their share of the national foster care population, and states must provide 20 percent of the cost of the programs.

⁶² “FY 2004 Chafee Foster Care Independence Program,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services retrieved on January 18, 2005 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws/pi/pi0401a2.htm>.

⁶³ Sec. 477(a) and (d)(1).

⁶⁴ Beyond the general purposes of the program outlined above, the only specific limit on the discretion of the states is the prohibition against using more than 30 percent of the funds they receive for room and board expenses of youth who aged out of foster care but have not yet reached age 21. The Chafee program was expanded in 2001 with the addition of Education and Training Vouchers, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

⁶⁵ In 2002, a survey conducted by the Child Welfare League of America found that 39 of the 44 states responding to the survey supplemented Chafee-funded services with state or local services. “Supplements to Chafee-funded Services, 2002” retrieved on August 1, 2005 from http://ndas.cwla.org/data_stats/access/predefined/report.asp?reportid=540.

⁶⁶ This is probably the case because the Chafee program represents only a small share of the federal expenditures for foster care, less than \$200 million out of about \$5 billion (or about 1 percent) spent for Title IV, Part E of the Social Security Act.

⁶⁷ The states must, of course, provide the 20 percent share of the cost of independent living programs mandated by the law, and some of them provide additional state funds. In addition, some private organizations such as the Casey Family Programs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and the Orphan Foundation of America have significant programs. A reasonable guess would be that the federal funding is about 65 percent of the resources available for independent living programs from all sources.

⁶⁸ An illustration of this variety within one state can be seen in the activities of the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program in Texas. See “Chafee Foster Care Independence Program 2002–2003 Progress Report and Application for 2004 Funds,” retrieved on March 17, 2005 from http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About/State_Plan/2003_Progress_Report/13Chafee.asp.

often combined with counseling and mentoring to provide foster youth with positive adult role models and adult relationships. Specific daily living skills and services include:⁶⁹

How to locate, obtain, and maintain affordable housing, including:

- Group homes, supervised apartments, and unsupervised apartments provided by the program,
- Using newspaper ads and other sources to find housing,
- Filling out an apartment application,
- Understanding an apartment lease,
- Providing financial assistance for a security deposit or rental payments,
- Advice and financial assistance to obtain furnishings and household supplies (sheets, towels, pots, dishes, etc.),
- Housekeeping skills, and
- Basic maintenance and repair skills (unplugging a toilet and resetting a circuit breaker).

How to manage personal finances, including:

- Basic budgeting,
- Opening a checking account,
- Balancing a checkbook,
- Paying bills,
- Obtaining a Social Security account, and
- Obtaining a Green Card or citizenship.

How to secure transportation, including:

- Navigating the public transportation system,
- Driver training,
- Obtaining a driver's license,
- Buying a car,
- Obtaining car insurance,
- Financial assistance for car purchase and insurance, and
- Basic vehicle maintenance.

⁶⁹ The examples which follow are drawn from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, *Title IV-E Independent Living Programs: A Decade in Review* (November 1999) and Alfred Sheehy, Jr. et al, *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System* (Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001).

How to provide personal care for oneself, including:

- Basic nutrition,
- Meal planning,
- Visiting a grocery store to shop,
- Basic cooking skills,
- Buying and maintaining appropriate clothing, and
- Doing laundry.

How to manage medical, dental, and mental health care for oneself, including:

- Personal hygiene,
- First aid,
- Fitness,
- Weight control,
- Birth control,
- Sexually transmitted diseases,
- Substance abuse, and
- Providing for temporary medical insurance coverage.

How to effectively and appropriately interact with others, including:

- Working cooperatively and as a team member,
- Leadership skills,
- Conflict resolution and problem solving,
- Anger management, and
- Timeliness and appropriate dress.

Chafee program services to provide foster youth with life skills for independent living are available to those “who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age.”⁷⁰ Federal law requires that there be a case plan for each foster child “assuring that the child receives safe and proper care.”⁷¹ It is further required that where appropriate for youth over age 16 the case plan must include “programs and services which will help ... prepare for the transition from foster care to independent living.”⁷²

The Chafee program permits services to be provided to foster youth up to the age of 21, but it specifies no minimum age for services. A recent U.S. Government Accountability

⁷⁰ Sec. 477(a).

⁷¹ Sec. 471(16) and Sec. 475(1)(B) of Part E – Federal Payments for Foster Care and Adoption Assistance of Title IV of the Social Security Act.

⁷² Sec. 475(1)(D) of Part E.

Office (GAO) report found that some states begin independent living services for foster youth as young as 12 but that most services were directed at youth age 16 and older in line with the requirement for independent living case plans at age 16.⁷³

Preparing foster youth for independent living is something of an anomaly for the professionals who deal with foster youth. The dominant thrust of their efforts is to arrange for foster youth to have a permanent place where they will be safe and well cared for through reunification with their family, placement with a fit and willing relative, or adoption. The independence programs run against the grain by requiring that foster youth be equipped to care for themselves rather than being placed where others will care for them. Preparing foster youth for independence often occurs concurrently with continuing efforts to find placements for them. Thus, these foster youth are sometimes at the same time on track to be dependent and to be independent.

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The independence program is also unique in the requirement that foster youth participating in the Chafee program “participate directly in designing their own program activities that prepare them for independent living.”⁷⁴ There is, however, no evidence that this requirement, enacted in 1999, is yet having a significant impact on the design and content of independent living programs.

There is anecdotal evidence as well as research indicating that providing foster youth with comprehensive skills training is associated with better outcomes for these youth.⁷⁵ On the other hand, some observers do not believe that the independent living programs are effective. A recent analysis concludes:

Despite the Chafee Act, many youth in care are still being sent out into the world with little more than a list of apartment rental agencies, a gift certificate for Wal-Mart, a bag full of manufacturer’s samples, perhaps a cooking pot, maybe a mattress.⁷⁶

Another article notes:

Young adults who have recently graduated from the system report that the first time they ever cooked for themselves, purchased groceries, looked for work, managed a personal budget, or cleaned an apartment was after they left foster care.⁷⁷

⁷³ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FOSTER YOUTH: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination and Monitoring of States’ Independent Living Programs* (November, 2004) pp. 15 and 22. Specifically the report notes: “4 states began services at age 12, 7 states began services at age 13, 27 states began services at age 14, 9 states began services at age 15, and 4 states began services at age 16.” *Ibid.*, p 15, note 19.

⁷⁴ Sec. 477(b)(3)(H).

⁷⁵ Westat, Inc., *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth, Phase 2*, Final Report (Rockville, MD: 1991).

⁷⁶ Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004) p. 8.

⁷⁷ Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, “Reversing the Failure of the Foster Care System,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal*, v. 27 (Spring 2004) p. 359.

The number of states offering programs for daily living skills and independent living arrangements has increased significantly since the enactment of the Chafee program in 1999. In 2003, for example, 38 states offered daily living skills programs to foster youth younger than 16 compared to 18 states in 1998. Similarly, in 2003, 48 states offered daily living skills programs to youth who had aged-out of foster care compared to 29 states in 1998.⁷⁸ However, it is clear that not nearly all of the foster youth who are likely to remain in care until age 18 receive any services to give them life skills for independent living. The GAO 2004 state survey showed that independent living services were provided to only about 44 percent of the foster youth who were eligible for them.⁷⁹

For the youth who do receive independent living services, the programs are often minimal, inconsistent, and fragmentary. A 2005 study of former foster youth in the Midwest found that only between 11 percent and 27 percent of the study participants received various specific independent living services. For example, 23 percent received training on balancing a checkbook, 25 percent assistance with finding an apartment, 22 percent meal planning and preparation training, 19 percent training on basic hygiene, and 26 percent education on substance abuse.⁸⁰

For the youth who do receive independent living services, the programs are often minimal, inconsistent, and fragmentary.

In sum, many foster youth are not served by independent living programs and those who are served do not receive a sustained or comprehensive program. The results reported in a 2001 Texas report are:

Youth and providers agreed that many emancipated foster youth are unprepared for independent living when they leave the care of the state. Many have little access to services.⁸¹

A 2004 Idaho report similarly concluded:

“(M)ost youth transitioning from in-house care to self-sufficiency did not appear to have the needed supports to meet self-sufficiency outcomes.⁸²

The real test is: compared to their peers, how well are former foster youth functioning as adults living independently? Unfortunately, compared to their peers former foster youth more frequently are financially insecure, engage in delinquent and violent behavior, are

⁷⁸ FOSTER CARE: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination of Services and Monitoring of States' Independent Living Programs, p. 18.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21-22. Forty states responded to this survey, which also “indicated substantial differences among the states in the proportion of youth served, ranging from a low of 10 percent up to 100 percent of the state’s eligible foster care population.” (p. 22) *The 2004 Green Book* (p. 11-7) reports that in FY 2002 nearly 100,000 foster youth received Chafee program services. It is not clear what this means in practical terms since there is no explanation of the age range of those served or the duration and intensity of the services received. A foster youth who attends one lecture on substance abuse could count as much as a foster youth who received comprehensive services for the entire year.

⁸⁰ Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth, Tom Keller, Judy Havlicek, and Noel Bost, *Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19* (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2005) p. 19.

⁸¹ Pam Hormuth, *All Grown Up, Nowhere to Go: Texas teens in foster care transition* (Austin, TX: Center for Public Policy Priorities, 2001) p. 2.

⁸² Brian Christenson, *Youth Exiting Foster Care: Efficacy of Independent Living Services in the State of Idaho* (Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington University, 2004) p. 4.

in prison, are homeless, abuse alcohol and drugs, engage in high risk sexual behavior, have early pregnancies in the case of women, and have untreated health problems.⁸³ More than 25 percent of all prisoners in the United States were at some time in the foster care system.⁸⁴ The Chapin Hall study concludes: “In summary, youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care are faring worse than their same-age peers, in many cases much worse, across a number of domains of functioning.”⁸⁵

Clearly, former foster youth less often behave like mature adults than their peers, and they do things that actually or potentially could exclude them from mainstream society, including higher education. In general, compared to their peers, these former foster youth have not developed as much adult competency, and therefore often they are not equipped to successfully pursue higher education, an inherently adult activity.

Recommendations

What can be done to improve this state of affairs? It is probably unrealistic to expect public or private programs to wholly replace the adult nurturing to maturity that many youth receive in healthy and caring families. In the final analysis, a “system” cannot be a “parent.” It is also perhaps premature to judge the success of the Chafee program since it has only existed for five years. However, there appear to clearly be some areas where improvements can be recommended.

. . . foster youth making the transition to independent living should receive comprehensive and sustained services.

First, and most obviously, all foster youth making the transition to independent living should receive support in developing life skills. Such services clearly can make a positive contribution to foster youth developing adult competencies. Currently, only about 44 percent of the foster youth eligible for such services receive them.⁸⁶

Second, foster youth making the transition to independent living should receive comprehensive and sustained services.⁸⁷ Too often, the independent living services received by foster youth are fragmentary and perfunctory. One recent study reports that funding from the Chafee program “amounts to well under \$1,000 per year for each eligible youth (those younger teens likely to stay in care until eighteen, plus those age eighteen to twenty-one who have already aged out).”⁸⁸ This amount is clearly not adequate to provide comprehensive and sustained independent living services.

Third, a corollary to the need to provide comprehensive services is the need to more effectively coordinate existing independent living services for foster youth. There are a

⁸³ *Ibid.*, *Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19*, and *All Grown Up, Nowhere to Go: Texas teens in foster care transition*.

⁸⁴ Charity Works retrieved on February 8, 2005 from http://www.charityworksdc.org/partners_2001.html.

⁸⁵ *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19* p. 71.

⁸⁶ *FOSTER CARE: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination of Services and Monitoring of States' Independent Living Programs*, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁷ See, for example, *Youth Exiting Foster Care: Efficacy of Independent Living Services in the State of Idaho*, p. 20, and Gary Anderson, *Aging Out of the Foster Care System: Challenges and Opportunities for the State of Michigan* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Program, 2003) p. 5.

⁸⁸ *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System?*, p. 262.

large number of separate state, local, and private programs designed to provide life skills for independent living for foster youth.⁸⁹ Also, the GAO identified 16 federal programs in addition to the Chafee program in the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, and Labor that fund “self sufficiency/skills development” services for foster youth.⁹⁰ These federal programs should be coordinated with each other as well as with state, local, and private efforts.

Fourth, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should take the lead in undertaking systematic evaluation of independent living programs to determine which programs work best and to encourage the replication of those programs. The Chafee program statute provides for the evaluation of Chafee program services including the “effects of the program on education . . . and personal development,” and about \$1.7 million per year in program funds are reserved for this purpose.⁹¹ Yet, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has been very slow to carry out such evaluations, and no mechanism is in place to encourage the states to use the Chafee program funds for the best and most effective practices.

A cursory review of the literature, including reports from foster youth, suggests that the most effective programs are those that are individualized for each foster youth, involve foster youth in the direct experience of learning life skills (shopping at a grocery store), provide concrete resources (a driver’s license, household furnishing, a bank account), and include long-term adult mentoring. There is, however, no sustained effort by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to test such impressions and to disseminate the results with the aim of maximizing the positive effects of the Chafee program and improving independent living programs generally.

Fifth, what all youth need generally in order to mature is enough time. This is especially true for foster youth. More foster youth would develop the life skills required for adulthood if the independent living programs began at an earlier age for those likely to remain in foster care until age 18. As noted above, most independent living services are concentrated on those over 16, in part because case plans are required to include preparation for independent living only for those over 16. Yet, also as noted above, some states begin independent living services at age 12, and the largest group of states (27) began at age 14. Perhaps a way to nudge the provision of independent living services to foster youth at an earlier age would be to require that care plans include preparation for independent living at age 14 where appropriate.⁹²

The Chafee program was created in 1999 in recognition of the fact that at 18 most foster youth are not prepared to successfully live independently. The Chafee program enables services to be extended to these youth until age 21. The recitation of the high levels of personally destructive and antisocial behavior displayed by former foster youth compared

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⁸⁹ *FOSTER YOUTH: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination of Services and Monitoring of States’ Independent Living Programs*, pp. 39–40.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Appendix II, pp. 46–48.

⁹¹ Sec. 477(g).

⁹² This would involve simply striking “16” in Sec. 475(1)(D) and inserting “14.”

to their peers suggests that foster youth have not yet developed adult competencies by age 18 or by age 21. In a recent national opinion survey respondents said that the age at which most average people are completely on their own is 23, and one-third felt that most are not on their own until age 25 or older.⁹³ Former foster youth face more barriers to attaining maturity than average persons yet they are expected to be on their own at age 18, or 21 if they are fortunate enough to receive Chafee program services.⁹⁴ One scholar summarizes the situation as follows:

It is a curious reality that society's most vulnerable youth, those who have suffered abuse or neglect and have never known consistent, permanent, nurturing adult relationships, are asked to be self-sufficient at a time when other youth are still receiving parental support in college or are experimenting with their first jobs from within the safe confines of a family.⁹⁵

The federal Higher Education Act incorporates the expectation that parents will financially support their dependent children until age 24.⁹⁶ Since the Chafee program is intended to in effect be a surrogate to provide the nurturing and skills for adulthood that would otherwise be provided by parents, perhaps eligibility for former foster youth for independent living services also should extend to age 24.⁹⁷

The clear need for help in the maturing of foster youth beyond 21, the view of the public that even average youth should not be generally expected to be completely on their own until 23, and the Higher Education Act precedent of parental responsibility until 24, all suggest that serious consideration should be given to extending the age of eligibility for Chafee program independent living services.⁹⁸ In short, foster youth need not only more intensive, comprehensive, and effective programs for independent living but also programs of longer duration, starting earlier, and ending later.

⁹³ Lake Snell Perry & Associates, "Public Opinion about Youth Transitioning from Foster Care to Adulthood," (May 2003) retrieved March 2, 2005 from <http://www.lakesnellperry.com/polls/index/htm>.

⁹⁴ There may well be instances of state, local or private programs providing support for independent living for former foster youth beyond age 21.

⁹⁵ Wendy Whiting Blome, "What Happens to Foster Kids: Educational Experiences of a Random Sample of Foster Care Youth and a Matched Group of Non-Foster Care Youth," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, v. 14, no. 1 (February 1997) p. 42.

⁹⁶ See generally Part F of Title IV of the Higher Education Act and specifically Sec. 480(d)(1).

⁹⁷ Connecticut already provides services until age 23 to youth who have aged-out of foster care and Massachusetts provides such services until age 22. Child Welfare League of America, "Conditions for Maintaining Youth in Foster Care Beyond Age 18, 2002," retrieved August 1, 2005 from http://ndas.cwla.org/data_stats/access/predifined/Report.asp?ReportID=241.

⁹⁸ In addition, a paper, "The Age of Independence: A benefit-cost analysis of extending foster care to age 21," by Jeanne Bayer Contardo and Nele Noe prepared for the course Economic Evaluation of Education at the University of Maryland (August 2005) suggests that it would be cost effective to extend general foster care support to youth until age 21. Using a range of reasonable assumptions this paper concluded that savings in public programs due to increased educational attainment and employment, decreased incarceration, and decreased pregnancy rates outweighed the costs of providing these additional federal benefits.

CHAPTER 3:

Mental Health

The central point of the previous chapter is that an extended experience in foster care for a teenager often results in that youth not having sufficient adult maturity and self-sufficiency to succeed in higher education. This is generally true despite the efforts of private and government independent living programs to compensate for the absence of parental and adult nurturing to teach life skills. This lack of fully developed adult skills is an important barrier to higher education opportunities for foster youth since higher education presumes a significant level of adult competency.

The central point of this chapter is that foster youth also have frequently been mentally and emotionally harmed by the abuse and neglect that led them into the foster care system as well as by the treatment they received while in foster care. The resulting mental illness and emotional fragility are also a significant barrier to higher education opportunities for foster youth.

There is a high incidence of severe mental health problems among foster youth compared to the general population. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study is the most recent and in-depth examination of the foster care population including a focus on their mental health.⁹⁹ This study surveyed adults in the Northwest between the ages of 20 and 33 who had spent at least one continuous year in foster care between the ages of 14 and 18.¹⁰⁰ Those in the study's sample are in the prime years for college attendance.

More than half of the foster youth alumni in this study (54 percent) had diagnosed mental health problems, which is more than twice the rate of the general population (22 percent).¹⁰¹ A similar level of mental health problems also was found among former foster youth in the Midwest.¹⁰² As might be expected, in addition to alumni of foster care, youth currently in foster care also have a high incidence of mental and emotional problems.¹⁰³ For example, the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being found that in 2000 about half of foster children had a clinical level of behavioral and emotional problems.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Peter Pecora et al, *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study* (Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁰² Mark Courtney et al, *Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19* (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2005). This study is less useful than the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study since it focuses only on a cohort of alumni at age 19, one year into legal adulthood, while the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study examines a broader group of foster care alumni, ages 20 to 33.

¹⁰³ See, J. C. McMillen et al, "Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders among Older Youths in the Foster Care System," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, v. 44, no. 1 (2005) and the studies cited in L. Anthony Loman and Gary Siegel, *A Review of Literature on Independent Living of Youths in Foster and Residential Care* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Applied Research, 2000); and Kathy Barbell and Madelyn Freundlich, *Foster Care Today* (Washington, DC: Casey Family Programs, 2001) pp. 6-7.

¹⁰⁴ Sharon Vandivere, Rosemary Chalk, and Kristein Anderson Moore, "Children in Foster Homes: How Are They Faring," *Child Trends* (2003) pp. 2-4.

The mental disorders of former foster youth surveyed in the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study were severe and often compromised their ability to function effectively as adults. In the order of their frequency, these former foster youth had been diagnosed in the past year for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (25 percent), major depression (20 percent), social phobia (17 percent), panic syndrome (15 percent), and generalized anxiety disorder (12 percent).¹⁰⁵ Twenty percent of those surveyed were diagnosed with three or more conditions.¹⁰⁶ The symptoms of PTSD include intense psychological distress caused by persistent re-experiencing of past trauma that is often accompanied by difficulty concentrating and completing tasks as well as by self-destructive and impulsive behavior.¹⁰⁷ The rate of PTSD among former foster youth was more than six times the rate of the general population and “up to twice as high as for U.S. war veterans.”¹⁰⁸

While being placed in the foster care system is a necessary expedient to safeguard the youth from abuse and neglect, it is nevertheless traumatic.

For many types of mental conditions persons in the general population had higher rates of recovery than foster care alumni. Most dramatically, members of the general population were almost three times more likely to recover from PTSD than former foster youth.¹⁰⁹ Thus, foster youth have a much higher incidence of mental illness than the general population, they have more serious disorders, and they recover less often or more slowly.¹¹⁰

There does not appear to be any research that specifically links diagnosed mental illness among foster youth with low rates of college attendance and completion. However, it stands to reason that those with diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, social phobia, panic syndrome, generalized anxiety disorder, or more than one of these conditions will find completing secondary school, applying for college, arranging for financing and living arrangements, and progressing through higher education especially difficult. Indeed, only about 50 percent of foster youth complete high school compared to about 70 percent of their peers. Completing high school is, of course, the most important step to become qualified for higher education. Only about 20 percent of foster youth enroll in postsecondary education compared to their peers 60 percent of whom enroll.¹¹¹

Preventing the development of mental illness among foster youth would most fundamentally require not having them experience the three traumas that often define their situation. First, they would not be subject to the abuse and neglect that brought them and their family to the attention of public authorities. Second, they would not be taken from their family and usually put in the care of strangers. While being placed in the foster care system is a necessary expedient to safeguard the youth from abuse and neglect, it is nevertheless traumatic. The calculus is that this trauma is outweighed by the trauma the youth would have suffered had they continued to bear abuse and neglect from their family.

¹⁰⁵ *Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*, p. 34. The severity of the mental illnesses of both former and current foster youth reported in the studies cited in notes 4 and 5 above are consistent with the findings of the *Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ American Psychological Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth edition (DSM-IV) (Washington, DC: 1994) pp. 424-25.

¹⁰⁸ *Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-39.

¹¹¹ See Chapter 1.

How to prevent abuse and neglect of youth by their families and how to make families in which abuse and neglect has occurred into safe and nurturing environments are critical public policy issues but beyond the scope of this report.

A third trauma is often inflicted upon foster youth by the foster care system itself. In theory at least, particularly for youth who remain in care for a substantial period of time (a year or more), the foster care system should be a surrogate source to provide the nurturing and upbringing that was not provided for foster youth by their biological parents. The foster care system should supply models for these youth through continuing ties to caring adults. Instead, these youth frequently are moved from one living arrangement to another breaking the ties that have been established to substitute for their missing family. In addition, the adults with whom these youth might have a long-term relationship, foster families and social workers, frequently turnover. Improving the continuity of the relationships between foster youth and foster families and social workers would require improved compensation and training for both foster parents and social workers. Social workers would also need to have more manageable caseloads. Foster parents and social workers would also need more support to enable them to spend more time with the foster youth and less time coping with and navigating the multiple bureaucracies with which they must work. Clearly programs for foster youth also should feature adult mentoring as a key strategy.¹¹²

Beyond more effective prevention of mental illness, foster youth would, of course, benefit from access to effective treatment.

Currently foster youth do not receive sustained nurturing from caring adults. That failure is part of a larger pattern of inadequate services to promote life skills and independent living. In Chapter 2 it was reported that these services reach less than half of foster youth, and that the services received are fragmentary rather than comprehensive and short-term rather than sustained.

In addition, there are a relatively small number of *substantiated cases* of foster youth being subject to additional abuse and neglect while in foster care.¹¹³ However, in one recent study, one-third of foster care alumni reported some form of maltreatment during their foster care experience.¹¹⁴

Beyond more effective prevention of mental illness, foster youth would, of course, benefit from access to effective treatment. Their access to such treatment is impaired generally by the lack of social acceptance of mental illness as a treatable condition and by the paucity of treatment options. When foster youth leave care at age 18, the adult mental health system generally provides a lower level of services compared to the mental health services available to youth.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Data describing the frequency with which foster youth change placements, turnover among foster parents and social workers, the need for improved compensation and training of foster parents and social workers, and social worker caseloads are presented in Chapter 2.

¹¹³ In 2001, based on reports from all states, less than 1 percent of children in foster care were the subject of substantiated or indicated maltreatment by a foster parent or facility staff member. US Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, *Child Welfare Outcomes 2001: Annual Report – Safety Permanency Well-being*, Chapter II, Table 1.

¹¹⁴ *Improving Family Foster Care: Finding from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*, pp. 30–31.

¹¹⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FOSTER YOUTH: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination of Services and Monitoring of States' Independent Living Programs* (Washington, DC: 2004) p. 23.

Furthermore, former foster youth frequently cannot access the adult mental health services that are available. They often join the ranks of the uninsured lacking access to private health insurance usually because they are either unemployed or their employment does not provide access to health benefits, including mental health benefits.¹¹⁶ In general they often lack the ability to pay for health care.¹¹⁷ The services to support independent living and life skills provided to former foster youth between the ages of 18 and 21 through the Chafee program may include temporary payment of health insurance premiums. However, this is clearly not a standard or widespread practice, and such independent living programs are available to less than half of the foster youth who are eligible.

While they are in care, foster youth are usually eligible for Medicaid, which provides insurance coverage for necessary mental health services.¹¹⁸ A significant percentage of foster youth, perhaps a third, continue to be covered by Medicaid after they leave care. They are eligible because of childbearing, disability, low-income, or other state-determined criteria.¹¹⁹ In addition, the Chafee program provides states with the option of extending through age 21 Medicaid coverage for youth leaving foster care. Only 31 states have chosen to provide Medicaid coverage using this option, and many states that do provide coverage limit access to specific subpopulations of emancipated foster youth usually based on income.¹²⁰

Recommendations

In line with the analysis in the previous chapter, it is recommended that all states be required to extend Medicaid to foster youth until age 21 or, better yet, until age 24. Until they have had a reasonable opportunity to reach adult maturity and competency, foster youth should not be denied access to health care because of a lack of ability to pay. They should especially be able to afford mental health care to treat the effects of the traumas that brought them into foster care or that they sustained while there.

Some foster youth with mental illness lack access to treatment and others do not have the ability to pay for treatment. In addition, a substantial number of foster youth needing mental health care and having access to it do not avail themselves of such care. Frequently these youth are not able to understand and manage their mental health needs. As described in Chapter 2, foster youth often do not develop the life skills necessary for independent living. Some may not be able, for example, to schedule and keep appointments or adhere to a regime of medication. A comprehensive and sustained program to provide life skills for independent living, as recommended in Chapter 2, should clearly have a major emphasis on adequately preparing foster youth to access health care services on their own.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Alfred Sheehy, Jr., et al, *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation) p. 45.

¹¹⁷ Elisabeth Yu et al, *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care* (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America Press, 2002) p. 21.

¹¹⁸ *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System*, p. 45.

¹¹⁹ Susan Badeau, *Frequently Asked Questions II About the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program* (Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs, 2000) pp. 18-19.

¹²⁰ *FOSTER YOUTH: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination of Services and Monitoring of States' Independent Living Programs*, U.S. GAO, p. 19.

¹²¹ *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System*, p. 44.

CHAPTER 4:

Educational Attainment in Secondary School

As many as 70 or 80 percent of foster youth aspire to enter college.¹²² These foster youth, as most of their peers, seem to understand that college attendance and particularly a college degree have increasingly become the tickets to success in America. However, many foster youth cannot turn this aspiration and this understanding into actual educational attainment. Only about 50 percent of foster youth complete high school compared to about 70 percent of their peers. High school completion is, in general, the threshold requirement for admission to an institution of higher education. A high school diploma generally makes one college qualified, able to attend not all but at least some institutions of postsecondary education. This chapter explores the reasons for the low rate of high school completion by foster youth and makes recommendations to improve their educational attainment.

Low Rates of High School Completion

The low rate of high school completion among foster youth is basically a reflection of the fact that they do not do well in school generally. Many studies document with depressing repetition the problems at school of foster youth.¹²³ Compared to their peers, these youth have higher rates of tardiness, absence, and truancy. They are more frequently placed on probation and suspended or expelled from school. They fail courses or repeat grades more often. They perform below grade level in reading and mathematics and have lower grade point averages and lower standardized test scores. Foster youth often fall behind early in their school years and never catch up.

One important reason for the low educational performance and attainment of foster youth is that they are highly likely to be poor. Disproportionately both the birth families from which foster youth came and the foster families with whom they are placed are poor. Like youth who are poor but who are not foster children, they receive an inferior quality of education beginning in their earliest years and are generally less successful in school than their peers.¹²⁴

¹²² See Table 7 in Chapter 1.

¹²³ See, for example, the research reported in Mason Burley and Mina Halpern, *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth: Achievement and Graduation Outcomes for Children in State Care* (Olympia Washington: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2001), p. 5; Steve Christian, "Educating Children in Foster Care," *Children's Policy Initiative* (Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2003), p. 1; Mark Courtney et al, "The Educational Status of Foster Children," *Issue Brief #102* (Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2004); Peter Pecora et al, *Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study* (Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs, 2003) pp. 26-34; and Elisabeth Yu et al, *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care: A National Collaboration* (Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 2002) pp. 2-4.

¹²⁴ See, *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth*, pp. 7-8; Kathy Barbell and Madelyn Freundlich, *Foster Care Today* (Washington, DC: Casey Family Programs, 2001) pp. 9 and 19 and Sharon Vandivere et al, "Children in Foster Homes: How Are They Faring," *Research Brief: Publication # 2003-23* (Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2003) p. 5.

However, in addition to the effects of poverty, foster youth do not do well in school and consequently fail to attain a high school diploma because of factors that are unique to their status as foster youth. Foster youth generally do not have sustained relationships with caring adults who could provide them with the upbringing and mentoring that would convey to these youth the value of educational attainment and provide them with the skills to translate that value into a reality.¹²⁵ They often do not have adult models of educational success to guide them.

Foster youth also have a high incidence of severe mental health problems compared to the general population.¹²⁶ Many foster youth are diagnosed with serious mental or emotional conditions that significantly compromise their ability to be successful in school.

Many foster youth are diagnosed with serious mental or emotional conditions that significantly compromise their ability to be successful in school.

For example, youth with emotional disturbances have the highest rate of dropping out of high school, and they are among the least likely to graduate high school with a regular diploma. Also, only about one in five enroll in any kind of postsecondary education.¹²⁷

Given the prevalence of mental disorders among foster youth it should come as no surprise that they have a high rate of participation in special education. About one-third of foster youth are in special education, which is about three times the rate for students who are their peers.¹²⁸

The foster youth in special education are primarily identified as having emotional or behavioral disorders or learning disabilities.¹²⁹ Some researchers suggest that foster youth are over-identified as needing special education as a simple way to deal with the problems they have adjusting to new schools.¹³⁰ Other researchers suggest that foster youth are underserved by special education because the child welfare system is not prepared to recognize their disabilities or to advocate for appropriate special education placements.¹³¹

The principal barrier to educational attainment and high school graduation that is unique to foster youth is that they experience frequent disruptions of their education as their school placements are changed. For example, school placements for foster youth can change because their residential placement has changed by moving to a different foster family or moving from a foster family to a group home. Of course, residential placements need not result in changes in school placement if, for example, the foster youth moved to a different

¹²⁵ See Chapter 2.

¹²⁶ See Chapter 3.

¹²⁷ Mary Wagner et al, *After High School: A First Look at the Postschool Experience of Youth With Disabilities (A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2(NLTS2))* (Mentlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2005) pp. ES-6 – ES-7.

¹²⁸ *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care*, pp. 6-7; and *Issue Brief #102*, pp. 3-4.

¹²⁹ *The Future For Teens in Foster Care*, p. 26.

¹³⁰ *Issue Brief #102*, p. 4 and Youth Advocacy Center, *The Future for Teens in Foster Care: The Impact of Foster Care on Teens and a New Philosophy for Preparing Teens for Participating Citizenship* (NY: 2001), p. 26.

¹³¹ Fostering Futures Project, *Are We Ignoring Foster Youth With Disabilities?* (Portland, Oregon: Oregon Health and Science University, 2003). One recent study notes that almost all of the foster youth who were interviewed did not attend a regular high school. They were placed instead in various kinds of “alternative” or “continuation” schools. The remarks of the foster youth about the educational quality of these schools were “extremely negative.” Sue Burrell, *Getting Out of the Red Zone: Youth from the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems Speak Out About the Obstacles to Completing Their Education, and What Could Help* (San Francisco, CA: Youth Law Center, 2003) pp. 7-8. This study raises the questions of how common is the placement of foster youth in alternative or continuation schools rather than in regular high schools, the appropriateness of these placements, and the impact of these schools on educational attainment generally and high school completion specifically for foster youth.

foster family within the same school attendance boundaries. School placements also change in the absence of changes in residential placement if the current school placement is determined to be inappropriate.

As noted in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, foster youth on average stay in care for a median length of time of 18 months and have three residential placements.¹³² This constitutes a change in placement about every 6 months.¹³³

Some research suggests that foster youth lose an average of four to six months of educational attainment each time they change schools.¹³⁴ Putting this finding together with a change in placement every six months implies literally that in general foster youth may make no educational progress while in care. And, those foster youth who change placements even more often could see their level of educational attainment actually diminished while they are in care.

... foster youth lose an average of four to six months of educational attainment each time they change schools.

The link between changes in school placement and diminished educational achievement for foster youth is consistent with research on youth in general, which found that changes in school placement are associated with lost educational growth and increased risk of educational failure.¹³⁵ And, a study of foster care alumni determined that the odds for foster youth of completing high school are very significantly increased if the number of placement changes decreases, and these odds of completing high school are very significantly decreased if the number of placement changes increases.¹³⁶ Many former foster youth also identified frequent changes in schools as a key factor in their inability to effectively focus on learning.¹³⁷

Frequent changes in school placement are disruptive of educational progress for four reasons.¹³⁸ First, as would be the case for all students, a change of educational placement breaks the continuity of education as students must adjust to a different curriculum, standards, classmates, and teachers.

Second, particularly for foster youth, a change of school substitutes a new group of strangers for a foster youth's often tenuous grip on security and stability. A change of

¹³² As explained in note 8 in the Introduction, the length of time spent in foster care and the number of placements is probably somewhat higher for the youth over age 13 who are the focus of this report. One study reported that more than one-third of adolescent foster youth in a three-state aging-out study reported five or more school changes. *Issue Brief #102*, p. 4.

¹³³ There does not appear to be any data either nationally or on a state or regional basis that specifically describes foster youth's number of school placements. As noted above, the number of residential placements and the number of school placements are not the same. However, for analytical purposes we assume that they are identical. The reasonableness of this assumption is confirmed by one study which found that "school mobility in out-of-home care is highly correlated with the number of locations at which a child in care lives during an academic year." *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth*, p. 9; and *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care*, p. 12.

¹³⁵ See the studies summarized in Casey Family Programs, *A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care* (Seattle, WA: 2004) p. 10.

¹³⁶ *Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study*, p. 44.

¹³⁷ Gloria Hochman, Anndee Hochman and Jennifer Miller, *Foster Care: Voices from the Inside* (Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004) p. 7.

¹³⁸ On the reasons why frequent changes in educational placements disrupt the educational attainment of foster youth see: Pamela Choice et al, *Education for Foster Children: Removing Barriers to Academic Success* (Berkeley, CA: Bay Area Social Services Consortium, 2001), pp. 79-83; *Issue Brief #102*, pp. 4-5; Mary Otto, "Learning to Study Out of a Suitcase," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2005, p. B5; *The Future for Teens in Foster Care*, p. 26; and *A Road Map for Learning*, pp. 13-14.

school repeats and reinforces the cycle of emotional trauma due to abandonment and repeated separations from significant adults that began with the separation from their parents. This trauma often compounds the mental health problems that are prevalent among foster youth and may lead to social withdrawal, rebellion, and other behaviors and emotional states that frustrate educational achievement.

Third, also unique to foster children, changes in educational placement often result in exceptional delays in the delivery of educational services. When youth in general transfer schools there are always bureaucratic delays as school records are transferred, placement exams are administered, medical and immunization records are updated, and students with disabilities receive new Individual Education Plans (IEPs). These

... changes in educational placement often result in exceptional delays in the delivery of educational services.

delays are particularly severe for foster youth because their legal and educational situations are often unusually complex. The frequent changes in educational placement of foster youth compound the tangled web of educational records (such as cumulative high school credits from several schools) that must be managed to effectively advance the education of these youth.

Fourth, there is often confusion about who has legal authority to enroll a foster youth in a new school, to agree to a new IEP, or to authorize the sharing of educational records protected by privacy laws. This confusion can also lead to enrollment delays. In addition, those with the power to act (including the courts, social workers or foster parents) may lack the time, information, skills or motivation to act aggressively, diligently, and in due time to best serve the education of the foster youth. These problems are exacerbated by the frequent turnover of child welfare workers, foster parents, and group home staff.

Recommendations to Improve Educational Attainment and High School Graduation for Foster Youth

- *Embedding educational achievement in the professional responsibilities of all those who care for and serve foster youth*

Those with professional responsibility for the care of foster youth, particularly the juvenile courts, child welfare agencies, and public schools, should, as a part of their job, more aggressively and effectively work to ensure the educational success of foster youth.

Policies for foster youth have always focused on ensuring their safety away from the neglect and abuse that brought them into foster care and on re-establishing foster youth in “permanent” settings as opposed to the temporary expedient of foster care. As the length of stays in foster care have become longer for many foster youth, policy has evolved to include a new emphasis on ensuring the “well-being” of foster youth both during foster care as well as in a permanent placement. Educational attainment is increasingly recognized as vital to the future self-sufficiency and success of foster youth and therefore to their well-being.

The federal goals of foster care changed in the mid-1990s to encompass the well-being of foster youth including their educational attainment.¹³⁹ In recent years, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has mandated that the states assess the performance of their foster care programs. This review process assesses the well-being of foster youth as a key outcome, and “appropriate educational services to meet children’s educational needs” is an indicator of success in achieving that outcome.¹⁴⁰

A shift in philosophy or professional culture is necessary for juvenile justice and child welfare agencies to seriously take on responsibility for the educational success of foster youth. The Director of the University of Chicago’s Chapin Hall Center for Children says, “The public child-welfare agency has to treat the education of school-age children in their care the way any parent treats education of their child. And that isn’t the case right now.”¹⁴¹ Instead, writes one analyst, “education has often been a low priority for child-welfare agencies, most of which are concerned more with their children’s safety and finding them placement.”¹⁴²

... all those who have responsibility for them must make the educational success of foster youth a key professional goal.

Public schools often resist serving foster youth viewing them as “problems” or as weak academic performers who threaten to pull down the school’s test scores. Foster youth are also sometimes perceived as not worth the investment of a lot of effort because they are likely to be at a school for only a short time.¹⁴³

Foster parents often take a less active role in supporting the education of their foster children than other parents. Foster parents, for example, monitor homework and attend parent-teacher conferences less often than other parents.¹⁴⁴

Juvenile court judges, social workers, foster parents and public school personnel may all feel that they lack the appropriate information and skills to effectively promote the education of foster youth. Judges and social workers also may be understandably reluctant to have their performance assessed by the educational progress of the foster youth in their care since these professionals have very little control or even influence over what goes on in schools. Nevertheless if the educational progress of foster youth is to improve, all those who have responsibility for them must make the educational success of foster youth a key professional goal. There is certainly movement in that direction with the changes in federal policy and accountability measures.

Another hopeful sign is the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges report, *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care*, which focused on changes in the

¹³⁹ The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care* (Washington, DC: 2004) p. 12.

¹⁴⁰ *Foster Care Today*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Amanda Paulson, “Fostering Education: In the Turbulent Lives of Many of the Half Million Foster Kids in the US, Education Isn’t a Priority,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 22, 2005, p. 15.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care*, p. 16.

¹⁴⁴ Wendy Whiting Blome, “What Happens to Foster Kids: Educational Experiences of a Random Sample of Foster Care Youth and a Matched Group of Non-Foster Care Youth,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, v. 14, no. 1 (February 1997) p. 48.

juvenile justice system to “improve the educational outcomes for foster youth.”¹⁴⁵ Nearly all the judges surveyed for this report agreed that a high-school diploma and postsecondary education were important for foster youth, and 89 percent of respondents agreed that “the same amount of attention needs to be paid to educational needs as to any other service provided by the court” to foster youth.¹⁴⁶

One judge said:

All of us in child welfare, including judges, need to realize that if education is important and valued for our children at home, it is more important for our children in care.... If we expect them to be productive members of society, we need to partner together and share responsibility for giving them the right tools to be able to do so.¹⁴⁷

This perspective is particularly encouraging since the juvenile judges bear the ultimate responsibility for supervising the care received by foster youth, hence the reference to foster youth as “wards of the court.” Further progress to put education among the key professional responsibilities of all those involved in foster care will require changes in the training they receive, sustained leadership, and more adequate resources to ensure that high quality personnel are hired, developed, and retained.

One practical step would be for all involved with the care of foster youth to avoid scheduling appointments during school hours. This would be a very concrete recognition of the importance attached to educational attainment for foster youth. When the education of foster youth is frequently disturbed for foster system appointments these youth get the message that their education is a low priority.

- ***Having high educational expectations for foster youth***

Having high expectations for the educational attainment of foster youth is a crucial first step for all those responsible for the care and education of foster youth. The current situation is often quite the opposite as described by recent observers:

Throughout the foster care system, teenagers are viewed as delinquents, victims, or mental health patients, rather than students, sons, and daughters. They are thought of as potential homeless shelter residents, prisoners, and welfare recipients, not as future college students, employees, business owners or professionals. This perception has been all-consuming and self-fulfilling.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ National Council of Juvenile and Family Justice, “Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care: Perspectives from Judges and Program Specialists,” *Technical Assistance Bulletin*, v. vi, no. 2 (June 2002) p. 1.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁸ Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, “Reversing the Failure of the Foster Care System,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal*, v. 27 (Spring 2004) p. 361

EDUCATIONAL ADVOCATES

One frequent suggestion to remedy the low priority placed on educational achievement for foster youth and their lack of educational success is to provide foster youth with educational liaisons or advocates.¹⁴⁹ This person would help the foster youth navigate the educational system and overcome impediments to educational achievement. This is not a good idea for three reasons.

First, creating educational advocates for foster youth could encourage all those with direct responsibility for the well-being of foster youth to ignore their job of ensuring the educational success of these youth. Social workers, foster parents, teachers, and counselors could pass on any question or issue related to education of a foster youth to the education advocate. This could marginalize the education of foster youth. The education of foster youth would no longer be a key part of the responsibility of all the professionals charged with the care of foster youth. It would instead be only the special concern of the education advocate.

Second, a cadre of educational advocates would create one more layer of bureaucracy involved in the education of foster youth on top of birth parents, foster parents, social workers, judges, counselors, teachers, and the IEP team. There would be one more party to coordinate with.

Third, the practical implementation of these proposals is not well thought out. In particular, none of the proposals explain from what source the education advocate would derive the power or authority to overcome the obstacles to educational attainment faced by foster youth. Who would employ the educational advocate? Would the advocate be empowered to make educational decisions on behalf of the foster youth, enroll him or her in school, or obtain educational records? What would these advocates actually do? One of those recommending these advocates naively suggests that part of their job will be to “just show up when needed.”¹⁵⁰ From whom would the advocate obtain his or her foster children clients — the court, the child welfare agency, or the school? Would each foster child have a separate education advocate, and would education advocates serve multiple foster children? If there are inadequate public resources to employ and retain highly qualified foster families, social workers, teachers, and counselors, where will the resources be found to employ a new cadre of educational advocates for foster children? What qualifications or training will education advocates have?

These proposals are an impractical distraction. The real effort should be directed at increasing the capacity [skills and resources] of those who have the responsibility for the education of foster children, especially social workers, foster families, and the schools. It should be emphasized to all these persons that high among their professional goals is ensuring the educational success of foster youth. All those involved should be given the tools to achieve this task and held accountable for the results. The educational success of foster youth should be mainstreamed not marginalized in the courts, in social welfare agencies, in schools, and in foster families.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, *A Roadmap for Learning*, pp. 26–27; Alfred Sheehy, Jr et al, *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System* (Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001) pp. 21–22; Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004) p. 250; and Curtis McMillen et al, “Educational Experiences and Aspirations of Older Youth in Foster Care,” *Child Welfare*, v. LXXXII, no. 4 (July/August 2003) p. 475.

¹⁵⁰ *On Their Own*, p. 250.

In the professional cultures of those who deal with them, foster youth must be thought of as potential “college material” and not pigeonholed or stigmatized as inevitably low achievers.¹⁵¹

- ***Minimizing changes in educational placement for foster youth***

As described above, changes in educational placement are very detrimental to the educational attainment of foster youth, and analysts and advocates have almost universally recommended that such changes be minimized.¹⁵² Obviously, stability in residential placement would greatly help in reducing the number of school placements. When residential placement does change, arrangements can often be made to maintain continuity in the foster youth’s schooling. Preference could be given to a new residential placement in the same school attendance area or arrangements made for transportation from the new residence to the school so that no change is necessary. When changes in educational placement are unavoidable, they can be executed to cause the least disruption in the foster youth’s educational program such as by scheduling the change during the summer months rather than during the school year.

... arrangements can often be made to maintain continuity in the foster youth’s schooling.

Avoiding interruptions in the school day for foster care appointments, reducing the number of school changes; preserving an educational placement even if there is a change of residency, and scheduling changes in educational placement to minimize disruption in the school year, all require that those who are responsible for the care of foster youth value educational continuity and achievement. They must all consider the impact of their choices on education as they carry out their other professional responsibilities for the safety, permanence, and well-being of foster youth.¹⁵³ This requires that everyone involved has high expectations for the educational achievement of foster youth.

When foster youth do change schools, much can also be done to mitigate the disruption by improving the transfer of school records. The State of Washington, for example, has pioneered a Foster Care Passport Program that provides a record of a foster child’s medical, behavioral, psychological, and educational status that makes educational record transfers within the state faster and more accurate. This system has now become a database accessible through the Internet.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ On the low expectations held for foster youth by social workers, teachers, and others and the importance of having high expectations for the education of foster youth, see, *Getting Out of the Red Zone*, p. 16; “What Happens to Foster Kids,” pp. 49–50; *Improving Family Foster Care*, p. 47; *The Future for Teens in Foster Care*, p. 26; Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, *Maine Study on Improving the Educational Outcomes for Children in Care* (Portland, ME: 1999) pp. 6–7; Gary Anderson, *Aging Out of the Foster Care System: Challenges and Opportunities for the State of Michigan* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Program, 2003) p. 20; and Julee Newberger, *From Foster Care to College Life* published on Connect for Kids, retrieved on August 16, 2005 from <http://www.connectforkids.org/node/261/print>.

¹⁵² See, for example, *Getting Out of the Red Zone*, p. 18; *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth*, p. 9; *Issue Brief #102*, p. 6; *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care*, pp. 9–14; *Improving Family Foster Care*; p. 47; and Pamela Choice et al, *Education for Foster Children: Removing Barriers to Academic Success* (Berkeley, CA: Bay Area Social Services Consortium, 2001) p. 95.

¹⁵³ Positive signs of progress in this direction include legislation adopted in Washington State, New Hampshire, and California to promote educational stability and continuity for foster youth. “Educating Children in Foster Care,” pp. 7–8.

¹⁵⁴ *A Road Map for Learning*, p. 13–15; and *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth*, 27–30.

- ***Timely and accurate data about the educational attainment of foster youth should be collected and used as a measure of accountability in providing for the “well-being” of foster youth***

The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program requires the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services to “develop outcome measures (including measures of educational attainment (and) high school diploma . . .) that can be used to assess the performance of States in operating independent living programs.”¹⁵⁵ This provision, which had a statutory deadline of 2001 for implementation, has yet to be carried out.¹⁵⁶ However, the current plan is for the states to begin collecting data for the required outcome measures in October 2006 with the first state reports to be submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2007.¹⁵⁷

Accountability for the educational attainment of foster youth would be even more powerful if the requirement for educational outcome data was linked to the basic federal program of support for foster care in Title IV, Part E of the Social Security Act and not just to the Chafee program. The federal government provides slightly more than half of all funds for child welfare programs of which the largest share (49 percent) is from Title IV, Part E of the Social Security Act.¹⁵⁸ The federal funds are administered through state agencies, and federal accountability requirements pervade and can shape the foster care system.

. . . federal accountability requirements pervade and can shape the foster care system.

Measuring educational outcomes for foster youth will be very challenging particularly because foster youth are entering and exiting foster care at various times during the year, frequently change their educational placement, and remain in foster care for different lengths of time. Representatives of both state and local education agencies and child welfare agencies should be involved in the development of appropriate and feasible education indicators.¹⁵⁹ Such a partnership could produce not only the best outcome data but also help build bridges between the professional cultures of educators and child welfare workers serving foster youth.

¹⁵⁵ Sec. 477(f)(1)(A) of Part E of Title IV of the Social Security Act.

¹⁵⁶ Sec. 477(f)(1)(C).

¹⁵⁷ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *2004 Green Book*, p. 11-51.

¹⁵⁸ Cynthia Scarcella et al, *The Cost of Protecting Vulnerable Children IV* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004) pp. 6-7, 14.

¹⁵⁹ The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care makes a similar, though broader, recommendation that “Congress . . . call on the National Academy of Science . . . to convene an expert panel to recommend appropriate outcomes and measures, particularly related to child well-being.” *Fostering the Future*, p. 30.

CHAPTER 5:

Progressing to Higher Education and a Degree

Of the foster youth who complete high school and are college qualified only about 20 percent enrolled in higher education compared to about 60 percent of their peers.

The gap between the rate of *college attendance* for foster youth and their peers (40 percentage points) is twice as large as the gap between the rate of *high school completion* for foster youth and their peers (20 percentage points).¹⁶⁰ This suggests that the barriers foster youth who are college qualified must confront in making the transition to higher education are significantly greater than the barriers to high school completion faced by these youth. The most likely general explanation is that undertaking the *adult* activity of transitioning to college is more difficult for foster youth than completing high school at the end of *childhood*. By the end of high school many foster youth have not achieved the level of adult skills and maturity needed in order to gain access to college.

This chapter explores the reasons for the low rates of college attendance and completion by foster youth and makes recommendations for improvements. In particular, it focuses on the frequent lack of an effective link between foster youth and the resources that are available for making the transition to college and to a degree. It also examines the limitations of the government and college programs designed to facilitate college attendance and completion for disadvantaged students such as foster youth. In short, foster youth often do not take advantage of the assistance available to them but, on the other hand, the programs designed to provide assistance often do not meet their special needs.

Why do college-qualified foster youth not attend higher education?

For the purpose of this report, all high school graduates are considered to be college qualified, and it is, in fact, the case that access to some form of higher education, especially community colleges and proprietary vocational schools, is available to all high school graduates. However, the high school preparation of many foster youth is deficient as preparation for higher education. They often did not enroll in rigorous courses or the college preparatory curriculum.¹⁶¹ Thus, many foster youth are not able to meet more selective admission's standards at many four-year colleges. In addition, their high school preparation was often in a milieu such as "alternative" or "continuation" schools where going on to college was not the common expectation of the teachers and students.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ See Chapter 1.

¹⁶¹ See the sources listed in note 122 of Chapter 4.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* and Sue Burrell, *Getting Out of the Red Zone: Youth from the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems Speak Out About the Obstacles to Completing Their Education, and What Could Help* (San Francisco, CA: Youth Law Center, 2003).

Thus, while foster youth who are high school graduates are technically college qualified, the reality is that many of them do not participate in a rigorous curriculum or in an environment in which the expectation of college attendance is pervasive and highly motivating.

... many foster youth are the victims of low expectations particularly related to educational achievement.

In addition, put simply, many college-qualified foster youth do not attend higher education because they do not apply to college. One important reason why they do not apply is that they do not believe that “college is for me and for people like me.” One former foster youth remarked, “College is not something people talk to foster children about. They don’t grow up with that cultural expectation.”¹⁶³ Another foster youth said that he had “no idea what it (higher education) was or how to get there.”¹⁶⁴ Some foster youth have low self-esteem and have not developed the motivation to pursue a college education.¹⁶⁵ This is in large measure a product of the absence of adult mentors from their family who could help develop in them the self-sufficiency and maturity required to gain access to college.¹⁶⁶ Those in the foster care system, the courts, social workers, foster parents, and school teachers and counselors, in many cases do not fill the gap to become adequate surrogates for the absent parents.¹⁶⁷ The services provided through independent living programs also do not fill the void.¹⁶⁸ Rather than being spurred on by the high expectations of their family and others many foster youth are the victims of low expectations particularly related to educational achievement.¹⁶⁹

The primary recommendation to improve this situation is, as outlined in the previous chapter, for those responsible for the care and education of foster youth to have high expectations for the educational attainment of these youth, including college attendance, and to guide them into a rigorous and challenging high school curriculum.

The second important reason why foster youth do not apply to college is that they are not aware of the college opportunities available to them, and they do not have the practical knowledge and skills to successfully navigate the complex college application process. Thus, the independent living programs discussed in Chapter 2 not only need to be more comprehensive, intensive, and practical in general, but they also should include information about college opportunities and specific activities to encourage applying to college, such as sponsoring pre-admission visits to college campuses or arranging for SAT preparation. In addition, those in the foster care system responsible for the well-being of these youth should be provided with the information and skills needed to assist foster youth in the transition to college in both pre-service and in-service training. Those in the foster care

¹⁶³ Julee Newberger, *From Foster Care to College Life* published on Connect for Kids, retrieved on August 16, 2005 from <http://www.connectforkids.org/node/261/print>.

¹⁶⁴ Anne K. Walters, “Helping Foster Children Feel at Home in College: State and federal lawmakers seek to provide financial aid and other support,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 12, 2005) p. A21.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* and Gloria Hochman, Anndee Hochman, and Jennifer Miller, *Foster Care: Voices from the Inside* (Washington, DC: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004), and Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004) Chapter 2.

¹⁶⁶ See Chapter 2.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ See Chapter 4.

system need to accept responsibility for facilitating the college attendance of foster youth as part of the job for which they will be held accountable. In specific, the transition planning required by law for foster youth over age 16 should explicitly include steps leading to postsecondary education.

Many foster youth also do not attend college because they cannot afford it. They are often low-income and lack the ability to pay for college. Compared to their peers, foster youth are much more likely to be poor before they enter the foster care system, while they are in foster care, and after they leave foster care.¹⁷⁰ Low-income students in general have fewer opportunities for higher education and financial barriers are one of the most important reasons why those who are college qualified do not attend higher education.¹⁷¹

In addition to the effects of poverty on those who are college-qualified and low-income, including college-qualified foster youth, these youth face special challenges in gaining access to federal, state, institutional, and private student financial assistance programs that aim to reduce financial barriers faced by those striving to attend college.

The federal government, particularly through its Pell Grant program and student loans, provides about three-quarters (\$81 billion) of the financial aid from all sources.¹⁷²

Included in the federal student financial aid is the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program specifically created to serve foster youth.¹⁷³ This program for foster youth participating in the Chafee independent living program was authorized in 2001.¹⁷⁴ State child welfare programs receiving Chafee funding also receive money to award ETVs of up to \$5,000 per academic year to youth who aged-out of foster care at 18 or who were adopted from foster care after age 16.¹⁷⁵ The ETV may be used for the cost of attending higher education including tuition and fees, room and board, transportation, and child care as well as other related expenses.¹⁷⁶ Foster youth who are receiving an ETV at age 21 may continue receiving it until age 23 as long as they are still

... the transition planning required by law for foster youth over age 16 should explicitly include steps leading to postsecondary education.

¹⁷⁰ See the sources listed in note 123 of Chapter 4. With respect to the low-income status of foster youth after they leave care, see Foster Care Working Group, *Connected by 25: A Plan for Investing in Successful Futures for Foster Youth* (n.d.) p. 27; Peter Pecora et al, *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study* (Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs, 2005) pp. 37-38; and Elisabeth Yu et al, *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care: A National Collaboration* (Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 2002) pp. 4-5.

¹⁷¹ Lawrence E. Gladieux, "Low-Income Students and the Affordability of Higher Education," in Richard D. Kahlenberg, ed., *America's Untapped Resources: Low-Income Students in Higher Education* (NY: The Century Foundation Press, 2004) and Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, *Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America* (Washington, DC: 2002).

¹⁷² College Board, *Trends in Student Aid 2004* (Washington, DC: 2004) pp. 4-5. This assumes that commercial loans that receive no government guarantee or subsidy are not a form of financial aid.

¹⁷³ "Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001," PL 107-133, Sec. 477 (i) of Part E of Title IV of the Social Security Act.

¹⁷⁴ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the basic provisions of the Chafee program.

¹⁷⁵ The eligibility for an ETV of those who were adopted out of foster care after age 16 recognizes in law an important premise of this report; namely that those who are disadvantaged by foster care include not only those who age-out of foster but also those who had a significant experience in foster care as teenagers.

¹⁷⁶ For examples of the variety of ways in which ETV are used in various states see U.S. Government Accountability Office, *FOSTER YOUTH: HHS Actions Could Improve Coordination and Monitoring of States' Independent Living Programs* (November, 2004) pp. 18-19.

enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program and are making satisfactory academic progress.¹⁷⁷ The ETV part of the Chafee program is a discretionary program with an annual authorization of \$60 million. It was first funded in FY 2003 and in FY 2005 has an appropriation of \$47 million.¹⁷⁸

The states are another major source of student financial aid, providing about 5 percent of the aid available from all sources.¹⁷⁹ Most of this state aid is targeted on low-income students. About 30 states have aid programs specifically tailored for foster youth beyond the federally funded ETVs. Many of these state programs provide for waiving public-college tuition for foster youth.¹⁸⁰

About 30 states have aid programs specifically tailored for foster youth beyond the federally funded ETVs.

Institutions of higher education are also a major source of student aid, accounting for nearly 20 percent of the aid available from all sources. This aid is increasingly awarded on the basis of academic merit rather than financial need and is therefore increasingly concentrated on students from upper-income families, making it less useful for foster youth.¹⁸¹ Also, private colleges and universities award most institutional aid. Since these institutions are generally higher-priced and have more competitive admissions, much of this aid is out of the reach of foster youth.

Private scholarships, including some specifically aimed at foster youth such as the Casey Family Scholars Program of the Orphan Foundation of America, are also available.¹⁸² However, these private scholarships represent only a very small share of the aid from all sources.¹⁸³

The average cost for full-time attendance at an institution of higher education in the 2004–05 academic year ranged from about \$11,000 for a commuter student at a two-year community college to \$30,000 for a resident student at a four-year private college.¹⁸⁴ Clearly students who cannot afford to pay this cost from their own or from their family's resources must rely on a package of financial assistance from several sources. No one source of aid or no one program, including an ETV, will provide enough money.¹⁸⁵ Overcoming this financial barrier is a practical problem of assembling enough money from a variety of sources. It is also a perceptual problem. An educator who works with foster youth observed that when these youth consider the cost of higher education, "the knee-jerk reaction is 'we could never come up with that amount of money.'"¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁷ The eligibility for an ETV up to age 23 recognizes in law one of the basic recommendations of Chapter 2; namely that independent living support for foster youth generally should be extended beyond age 18 or 21 since foster youth have very often not achieved maturity or acquired adult skills by 18 or 21.

¹⁷⁸ In FY 2003, states received between \$74,000 (Wyoming) and \$8 million (California) for ETVs. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 2004 *Green Book*, pp. 11-49 – 11-50.

¹⁷⁹ *Trends in Student Aid 2004*, p. 5.

¹⁸⁰ "Helping Foster Children Feel at Home in College," p. A21.

¹⁸¹ *Trends in Student Aid 2004*, p. 5.

¹⁸² Casey Family Programs, *A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care* (Seattle, WA: 2004) p. 55.

¹⁸³ The Institute for Higher Education, *Private Scholarships Count* (Washington, DC: 2005) p. 1.

¹⁸⁴ College Board, *Trends in College Pricing 2004* (Washington, DC: 2004) p. 6.

¹⁸⁵ For an example of a package of aid see Ruth Massinga and Peter Pecora, "Providing Better Opportunities for Older Children in the Child Welfare System," *Future of Children*, v. 14, no. 1 (Winter 2004) p.162.

¹⁸⁶ "Helping Foster Children Feel at Home in College," p. A22.

To overcome the practical and perceptual financial barrier foster youth must connect with the available sources of aid. Making this connection requires that foster youth have the same self-assurance and adult skills (or assistance from adults) that they need in order to navigate the college admissions process. However, as in the case of college admissions, foster youth often lack these necessary attitudes and skills or do not receive the help they need from the foster care system or the schools. They often have not achieved the psychological strength and practical skills they require through independent living programs. The adults in the foster care system, the courts, social workers, foster parents, teachers and counselors, often do not have the time, information or inclination to provide the assistance needed. The recommended remedy for the difficulty faced by foster youth in overcoming the financial barriers to college access is the same as for the difficulty they face in the college admissions process—improved independent living programs and greater information, skills, and commitment from the adults in the foster care system who are responsible for the well-being of these youth.

In addition to the difficulties foster youth have in connecting with the college admissions and student financial aid processes, the programs that exist to help them are often inadequate to meet their needs.

The federal TRIO programs, particularly Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Educational Opportunity Centers, aid pre-college youth and adults who are low-income and first-generation-in-college to overcome social and cultural barriers to higher education access. These programs provide outreach and support services such as information about college admissions and financial aid, assistance in applying for admissions and financial aid, academic counseling and tutoring, and mentoring. Despite the fact that most foster youth, who are low-income and first-generation-in-college, are eligible for these programs, they are often not effectively served by them. Similarly, the federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) aims to provide comprehensive mentoring, counseling, and support services to low-income students beginning the in the seventh grade, including information and assistance related to college admissions and financing. Unfortunately, both the TRIO programs and GEAR UP have not focused on foster youth and their unique concerns. Legislation, which is to be commended, has been introduced in the 109th Congress (2005-06) as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to encourage these programs to more effectively serve foster youth.¹⁸⁷

As noted earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 2, the independent living assistance provided through the Chafee program as well as other state and local support services often are not effective in providing independent living skills in general and assistance in college admissions and accessing student financial aid in particular. These services need to be higher quality, more comprehensive, and of longer duration, lasting beyond age 18 or 21.

For most foster youth, applying for financial aid is a crucial step in securing access to higher education. However, the amount of aid that is available from the federal student

... TRIO programs and GEAR UP have not focused on foster youth and their unique concerns.

¹⁸⁷ See Sec. 402 of S. 1614 (Enzi) and Sections 212, 213, 215, 216, and 222 of S. 1429 (Murray). S. 1429 also includes "Demonstration Projects to Increase Enrollment and Success of Highly Mobile Students in Postsecondary Education" including "wards of the State" (foster youth).

aid programs often is not adequate to meet the financial need of foster youth and other low-income students.¹⁸⁸ In particular, college prices, including tuition, fees, books, and living costs, have been increasing much more rapidly than financial aid. The federal Pell Grants, which maximize student choice among colleges and which need not be repaid, are perhaps the best form of financial aid to expand higher education opportunities for foster youth and other low-income students. Although the maximum Pell Grant for the academic year 2005–2006 is \$4,050, the purchasing power of these grants has steadily decreased over the last 30 years. Also, if a foster youth receives a maximum Pell Grant (\$4,050) and a maximum ETV (\$5,000), he or she still does not have enough grant money (\$9,050) to pay for even full-time study as a commuter at the average-price public community college (\$11,000).

... proposed changes would make applying for federal financial aid more accessible for foster youth and other low-income students.

In addition, in the last decade loans have continually grown as a share of total student financial aid. The prospect of large and growing loan indebtedness is particularly daunting for foster youth who frequently lack experience with and information about financial matters. Thus, more aid needs to be available, particularly in the form most useful to foster youth (grants rather than loans) so that getting through the process of applying for financial aid actually produces enough money to pay for college.

Often the process of applying for federal financial aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) becomes in itself a barrier to getting the money needed to go to college. For example, in order for a foster youth to establish that he or she is an independent student who does not have a family available to share the cost of the higher education, the FAFSA requires that the foster youth check the box indicating that he or she is or was “(until age 18) a ward/dependent of the court.” It is not obvious that this refers to foster youth and no additional clarification is provided in the instructions. In addition, it is often not clear that financial aid administrators can tailor federal financial aid to consider the special circumstances of foster youth or that if one school to which a foster youth has applied recognizes the special circumstances of the foster youth that other schools can rely on that determination. Legislation to remedy these problems as well as to simplify the FAFSA and the federal financial aid process generally has been introduced in the 109th Congress as part of the Higher Education Act reauthorization process.¹⁸⁹ These proposed changes would make applying for federal financial aid more accessible for foster youth and other low-income students.

There is a need for a comprehensive assessment of the barriers to accessing financial aid faced by foster youth that goes beyond the provisions included in the various bills for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, established by the Higher Education Act, would be the most appropriate body to undertake such an assessment and to make recommendations for improving the financial aid process to better serve foster youth. We recommend that the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, now under consideration, provide the mandate and the resources to the Committee to undertake this task.

¹⁸⁸ See the sources listed in note 171 above.

¹⁸⁹ See Sec. 113 of S. 1261 (Alexander), Sec. 101 of S. 1429 (Murray), Sec. 472 of H.R. 609 (Boehner) and Sec. 4 of H.R. 2508 (Miller).

The adequacy of the ETV provided through the Chafee program is yet to be determined. The program first became operative for the 2003–2004 academic year, and it therefore does not have a long-enough track record to judge the appropriateness and efficacy of the amount of aid available, the uses of the funds, and the process for delivering aid to foster youth. The ETV has one very important feature that should be continued. Financial aid received by a foster youth through an ETV may be disregarded in the awarding of other federal student financial aid such as Pell Grants.¹⁹⁰ This means that an ETV can be added to a Pell Grant rather than substituted for it in assembling a larger and more adequate package of financial aid to pay for college.

Whether state student financial aid programs suffice to serve the needs of foster youth is also difficult to determine. It is not just a question of whether states have or do not have specially designed programs and benefits for foster youth such as tuition waivers for public higher education institutions. Some states, such as California and New York, have broad and relatively generous financial aid programs that serve all low-income students including foster youth. These states do not have, and arguably do not need, extensive separate programs for foster youth. Other states may have small special benefits for foster youth and very limited financial assistance for low-income students generally resulting in a scanty amount of total financial aid available to foster youth.¹⁹¹ As noted above, it is certainly fair to say that the financial aid available from all sources for low-income students including foster youth is not adequate to overcome the financial barriers to higher education opportunities that they face.

Also special programs of state student financial aid for foster youth are certainly useful in sending a message to foster youth that higher education is for them and that the state holds high expectations for their educational attainment. On the other hand, such programs make the student financial aid process more complex and difficult to navigate. They are one more eligibility determination that must be met and one more form that must be completed.

... special programs of state student financial aid for foster youth are certainly useful in sending a message to foster youth that higher education is for them ...

Why do foster youth in college not complete their degrees?

The small amount of fragmentary data about college completion by foster youth suggests that there is a very high rate of attrition among foster youth and that relatively few complete a degree program. There are several factors that account for this situation.

Foster youth frequently have not developed the independent living skills needed to manage both life and studying on their own. One foster youth reported:

State college is scary and overwhelming. You go to an environment and don't know what to do.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Sec. 477(i)(5) of Part E, SSA Title IV.

¹⁹¹ The next step in research and analysis, which was not undertaken for this report, would be to add the general financial aid benefits available to all low-income students (including foster youth) to the special benefits available only to foster youth for each state. This total amount of state student financial aid available to foster youth could be added to available federal aid and compared to the cost of higher education in each state, particularly tuition costs in public higher education. Such an analysis would allow conclusions to be reached about the adequacy of financial aid available for foster youth in each state and the relative financial barriers to higher education opportunities for foster youth.

¹⁹² *Getting Out of the Red Zone*, p. 16.

Foster youth are often preoccupied with managing their daily living and daunted by the relentless search for enough money to pay the academic bills and to support themselves.

Moreover these youth frequently struggle to overcome a weak academic foundation in their pursuit of a higher education.

The mental health problems faced by many foster youth sap their energy and their concentration undermining their ability to perform successfully academically.

Many foster youth do not seek assistance from campus student services counselors who are available. Foster youth often do not know what is available or they resist getting help, wanting to put their experience in the “system” behind them and fearing that they may be stigmatized as a foster youth.

In addition, student services personnel are often ill-prepared to deal with the unique issues and concerns that foster youth bring with them to higher education. This is true as well for the TRIO program Student Support Services that is designed to facilitate retention and completion of low-income and first-generation-in-college students by offering tutoring, counseling, and remedial instruction.

Often the most critical special needs that foster youth have for college services is a place to stay during break periods when student housing is closed. One foster youth reported that “because he had nowhere to go and was too proud to request assistance, he spent his first Christmas break from college sleeping in his Volkswagen.”¹⁹³ Legislation has also been introduced in the 109th Congress as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to encourage the Student Support Services program to better serve foster youth and for this program and others to address the special housing needs of these youth.¹⁹⁴

After enrollment in higher education, foster youth continue to face financial barriers as they often struggle to find financial resources and to manage the money they have. One remarked:

At my college, there is no one I could turn to and I wasn't getting any information about financial help that would lead me to believe that there is someone who would help.¹⁹⁵

Another foster youth reported:

Nobody explained the financial stuff to me. No one explained the work/study money to me. I thought if I worked it was my money. I didn't know it was supposed to go for my tuition. So I spent it. I felt I earned it, so I spent it. So I was kicked out of school and my dorm. I didn't have any place to stay. I needed someone to help me. There was nothing set up, nothing at

¹⁹³ Casey Family Programs, *Higher Education Reform: Incorporating the Needs of Foster Youth* (Washington, DC: 2003) p. 4.

¹⁹⁴ See Sec. 402 of S. 1614 (Enzi), Sec. 214 of S. 1429 (Murray) and Sec. 3 of H.R. 2508 (Miller).

¹⁹⁵ Gary Anderson, *Aging Out of the Foster Care System: Challenges and Opportunities for the State of Michigan* (E. Lansing, MI: Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Program, 2003) p. 21.

the school and no kind of family support so I had to beg my way back into school. I cried for two weeks to get into school. Then I took out another loan to get back into school.¹⁹⁶

This quote is, in effect, a good summary of many of the factors mitigating against degree completion by foster youth: lack of maturity and adult skills, dearth of information, poverty, no family support, no home base, and inadequate financial aid, student services, and counseling.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

