



Published in final edited form as:

*Child Youth Serv Rev.* 2008 ; 30(7): 735–745.

## Older Youth Leaving the Foster Care System: Who, What, When, Where, and Why?

Henrika McCoy<sup>\*</sup>, J. Curtis McMillen, and Edward L. Spitznagel

*Washington University in St. Louis*

### Who, What, When, Where, and Why?

States differ in the ways in which older youth exit from foster care. States such as Texas, California and Wisconsin require youth to exit the foster care system by age 18 or when they complete high school. Many other states such as New York, Maryland and Illinois allow youth to stay in the foster care system until age 21. Recent work from the Midwest Study of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth compared youth who left the foster care system between ages 17 and 19 with those who remained and found evidence that remaining in care was beneficial for youth on several dimensions (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). This has led to a renewed call to increase the age of foster care exit to age 21 in some states. Little research, however, has examined the older youth foster care transition in states where youth can remain in care past age 18. This article uses research from Missouri, where older youth can stay in the foster care system until age 21; to address several different questions about the phenomenon of transitioning out of the foster care system between ages 17 and 19. Quantitative methods will be used to address three questions. Who exits before age 19 and who stays? When do they exit? Where do they go? Qualitative methods will be used to address two complementary questions. What are the circumstances of their exits? Do they want to exit and if so, why?

### Literature Review

It is estimated that approximately 20,000 youth age out of and exit foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Exits from care also occur because youth are emancipated to independent living or return to live with their birth families; however others become incarcerated, enter psychiatric hospitals, or run away (Courtney & Barth, 1996). In the past few years, substantial literature has developed on the status of older youth in the foster care system (McMillen, Zima, Scott Jr., Auslander, Munson, Ollie et al., 2005; McMillen & Tucker, 1999) and on young adult outcomes for youth who have left the foster care system (Collins, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001). Child welfare practitioners have placed heavy emphasis on helping youth prepare for and plan a thoughtful exit from the foster care system. To assist in these efforts, tools have been developed to assess readiness for independent living (e.g., Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment) and to teach the skills needed for independent living (see a list of available on-line curricula at [http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/res/res\\_ACLSAGuidebook.htm#2](http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/res/res_ACLSAGuidebook.htm#2)).

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author. George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington, University in St. Louis, Campus Box 1196, St. Louis, MO 63130. E-mail address: [hmccoy@wustl.edu](mailto:hmccoy@wustl.edu).

**Publisher's Disclaimer:** This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final citable form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

Using data from three Midwestern states collected at age 17 and 19 Courtney and Dworsky (2006) showed that age 19 outcomes were worse for young adults who left the foster care system compared with those who stayed in the foster care system. Their findings point to a need to understand more about how and why older youth leave the foster care system, especially in states that allow older youth to stay in care to age 21.

Three studies used administrative data to examine the official reasons listed for older youth exits, with varied results. Two of these studies were from California and Wisconsin where youth leave care by age 18. In a California study of 2,653 older youth, 60% were classified by workers as discharged because they were emancipated or reached the age of majority (Courtney & Barth, 1996). Another 17% returned home or were adopted and the remaining 23% ran away, were incarcerated, were psychiatrically hospitalized, refused services, were abducted, or died. In the Wisconsin study of 6,274 youth age 17 and older, 53% were classified as having been reunified with parents or placed with relatives, 28% were emancipated or had completed their education, 6% were transferred to another state facility, 6% were discharged to independent living, 6% ran away, and slightly less than 1% were adopted (Dworsky & Courtney, 2000). Administrative data were also used in a much smaller study in Missouri, where older youth can stay until age 21. Of 252 youths discharged after age 17, 60% of the cases were listed as closed as a result of “goals achieved,” with 4 percent released because they were runaways and 29% released for “other” reasons (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Together, these three studies suggest that a minority of older youth, 4% to 23 %, left the foster care system under negative circumstances.

The Missouri study however, also examined case record information to categorize the reasons for exit from the foster care system, and these data told a different story. According to the case record abstractions, only 20% exited because they had attained their independent living goals (compared with 60% of the same cases in administrative data). An additional 17% had other positive discharge reasons: 10% had a planned reunification or placement with relatives, 6% had reached the age of 21, and 1% were adopted. However, 26% were discharged for refusal of additional services, including runaways; 10% had an unplanned reunification with family; 4% were discharged because of marriage; 1% were discharged because of incarceration; and another 5% were discharged by the court for unclear reasons. Overall, 63% of youth left due to unplanned exits (McMillen & Tucker, 1999).

Other efforts explored youths’ views of leaving the foster care system in small convenience samples. In 1998, the Child Welfare League of America held a meeting of select older youth who had left the Baltimore foster care system. The participants indicated that their transition out of the system “was often very rapid, sometimes unplanned for or unexpected” (Nixon & Jones, 2000, p. 5). Some felt “dumped” from the system without adequate preparation (Nixon & Jones, 2000). These experiences were echoed in a New Jersey report in which some older youth indicated that they were notified without prior warning by mail that they were being discharged from the system (Mendel, 2001). Negative experiences were also noted in government reports from Texas (Strayhorn 2004a; Strayhorn, 2004b). One youth said, “My worst experience is turning 18 and getting ready to leave custody but [I] had nowhere to go, no job experience either” (Strayhorn, 2004a, p. 233). After discharge, some refused additional services or engaged in criminal activity or drug use (Strayhorn, 2004a). Finally, in the book *On Their Own*, Shirk and Stangler (2004) shared case studies of a small number of youth who aged out of the foster care system. Reasons for leaving the system included a fear of arrest, a desire to be treated like an adult, and simply being sick of the system. In sum, despite efforts to plan thoughtful exits from foster care, a significant number of youth seem to leave the system by way of unplanned exits. Most are not discharged because they are ready for independence.

Much remains unexplored. In states where youth can stay in the foster care system past age 18, who stays in care, who leaves and when they leave are not known. Where youth live after age 18, for those who remain and those who leave the foster care system is also not known. Little is known about how and why young adults leave the foster care system in states where they can stay. Do the most negative exit experiences found in anecdotal reports, such as being notified by mail of being discharged, occur in substantial numbers in more systematic research? Answering questions like these will inform efforts to better help older youth plan for system exits and help states keep youth in care past age 18, if they determine it is in the best interests of older youth.

## Methods

These mixed-method analyses used data from a longitudinal study, conducted between December 2001 and May 2003, of a universal sample of 404 older youth from eight Missouri counties, 90% of those eligible for participation. The young people were all in the legal custody of the Missouri Children's Division when originally interviewed at age 17 and were living in a variety of placements types, including some, (n=33), in a trial placement with their biological parent(s) after time spent in foster care. Interviews were conducted by full-time professional interviewers who had at least a bachelor's degree in a social science. The young people were interviewed in person near their 17th birthdays and then interviewed every 3 months (often over the phone) until age 19. Youth were interviewed with a structured protocol that included the use of a life history calendar (Caspi, Moffitt, Thomas, Freedman, Amell, Harrington et al., 1996) to improve recall and some open-ended questions. These analyses used data from all nine interviews. All procedures were approved in advance by the Washington University Protection of Human Subjects Committee.

At the final interview, at age 19, we interviewed 325 young adults, 80% of those originally interviewed. Most participants not retained for the final interview were lost because of an inability to locate them (63 participants, 16%). One participant died before age 19. Two others became ineligible because of disability. Seven young people (2 %) chose to leave the study. Seven (2 %) were incarcerated and we were unable to gather required protections or permissions to conduct interviews with them. Two were not interviewed because of overseas military service. Multivariate logistic regression analyses to predict retention revealed that the following characteristics were associated with decreased odds of being retained in the study to final interview: being male (odds ratio [OR] = .34,  $p < .001$ ), having past-year posttraumatic stress disorder at initial interview (OR = .36,  $p = .025$ ), having a history of juvenile detention by first interview (OR = .26,  $p = .016$ ), and being released from the state's custody before age 19 (OR = .26,  $p < .0001$ ).

## Measurement

Custody status throughout the period from age 17 to 19 was determined by youth self-report for those interviewed and from the Children's Division for youth not retained in the study or youth who were unsure of their exit date from the foster care system. For study purposes, we use the number of months since the 17th birthday to system exit as a dependent variable for some analyses. Youth were asked a number of other questions about their exit from the foster care system. At age 17, youth were asked when they thought they would exit the Children's Division custody. Youth who exited the foster care system were asked a series of questions in the interview after exit, such as "Whose idea was it to leave custody?" "Did you want to leave custody?" "If yes, why did you want to leave?" "Can you tell me something about how your leaving came about?"

Numerous potential predictors of exit from the foster care system after age 17 were culled from the age 17 interview. Race was recoded into a dichotomous variable called "youth of color"

because the sample included small numbers of Asian, American Indian, and Latino youth. We recoded the eight counties from which youth came into one of four geographic codes: St. Louis City, St. Louis County, southwest Missouri, and exurban St. Louis. Youth self-reported prior histories of inpatient psychiatric hospitalization, juvenile detention, a history of living on the street, and age 17 use of psychotropic medications using the Service Assessment for Children and Adolescents (SACA; Stiffman, Horwitz & Hoagwood, 2000). With youth over the age of eleven, the SACA has demonstrated moderate to excellent reliability for lifetime and past year service use; also favorable is the relationship between youth reports when compared with their actual record of use (Horwitz, Hoagwood, Stiffman, Summerfeld, Weisz, Costello, et al., 2001). Lifetime history of attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder, disruptive behavioral disorder (conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder), major depressive episode, and mania were assessed at age 17 with the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for DSM-IV (DIS; Robins, Cottler, Bucholz & Compton, 1995). The DIS is a structured tool designed that can be used by lay interviewers; it assesses the recency, onset and duration of DSM-IV diagnoses as well as impairment across diagnoses in a standard way and considers impairment as required for determining diagnosis. It has demonstrated moderate validity and test-retest reliability for current and lifetime diagnoses (Helzer, Spitznagel & McEvoy, 1987; Robins et al., 1995). Histories of child physical neglect and physical abuse were assessed by using the cut scores on subscales of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998). Three interview items, previously used in a study with older youth in foster care (Auslander, McMillen, Elze, Thompson, Jonson-Reid & Stiffman, 2002), were included in this study. Youth were considered to be intrusively sexually abused if they answered affirmatively to a question from Russell (1986) about whether anyone ever had vaginal, oral, or anal sex with them against their wishes. Alcohol use from the past 6 months was assessed with a single question, “On how many occasions have you drunk beer, wine, or liquor in the past 6 months?” Residence at time of first interview was classified into five categories: with a birth or adoptive parent; with another relative; in a nonkin foster family; in a congregate care living environment (group home, residential treatment, shelter, detention); or living more independent, such as in an apartment.

## Analyses

Many analyses were descriptive. Predictors of time to exit from the foster care system were analyzed by using Cox proportional hazards regression in SAS 9.1 using proc lifetest and proc phreg. The predictor variables were examined as a group in three different multivariate models, this method allowed for any variables of concern to be controlled for. The first model included all the predictor variables; they were examined at the bivariate level to determine the significance of each variable individually. The second model included only the predictor variables that were statistically significant at the bivariate level. For the second model, geographic regions were not included due to concern that they could serve as a proxy for race. The third model included all the predictor variables and used manual backwards elimination to create a more parsimonious model. In the third model geographic region was not included so that it could not serve as a proxy for race, but the race variable itself was specifically included.

The qualitative data were read by two readers to identify empirical categories, and a codebook was created. Next a single reader used NVivo software to code the answers with a subset of the data after interrater agreement was established. In many instances youth provided complex answers, therefore their answers could be categorized into more than one category.

## Results

### Who Exits Early and Who Stays?

The results from the bivariate analyses indicated a number of predictors for when youth left the foster care system (Table 1). Youth with externalizing behavior problems left earlier than did other youth, as indicated by a number of variables, including history of a disruptive behavioral disorder, history of juvenile detention, alcohol consumption, and marijuana use. In addition, two other variables that could also serve as a proxy for externalizing behaviors, a history of living on the streets and residence in multiple placements in the past year, were also predictors of leaving the foster care system early. For illustrative purposes, Figure 2 shows the relationship between leaving care and a history of juvenile detention before age 17. White youth left earlier than youth of color. Youth who were already living with a parent at age 17 left earlier than youth living with nonkin foster families.

The different methods to build multivariate models yielded similar results. Table 2 presents the model-building effort with backward elimination. All three model-building efforts found juvenile detention history, placement status at age 17, geographic region, and number of prior year placements as predictors of system exit. The manual elimination model was more revealing. Race predicted system exit depending on which variables were in the model. With geographic region in the model, race was not related to system leaving, it is possible that in this case geographic region was acting as a proxy for. Without geographic region in the model, White youth were more likely to leave early than were youth of color. In the backward elimination model, more alcohol consumption also predicted leaving early.

### When Did Youth Exit the Foster Care System?

Figure 1 shows the number of youth in and out of the foster care system between the participants' 17th birthdays and the months of their 19th birthdays. By the month of their 19th birthdays, 234 (57.9 %) of the 404 older youth participants had exited the foster care system. Youth began leaving the system soon after their 17th birthdays. In Missouri, the court can release custody of a youth at age 17 without custody being transferred to another adult or agency and without the youth being legally emancipated. The modal exit month was the month of the 18th birthday when 31 youth (7.7%) left the foster care system. Of the 325 youth retained in the interview study to age 19, 168 (51.7%) had exited the foster care system by their 19th birthday.

These numbers were not far from when youth expected to leave the custody of the child welfare authority. At age 17, we asked youth at what age they thought they would leave the custody of the Children's Division. Eighty-one (20.5%) said before age 18, 190 (47%) said at age 18, 15 (3.7%) said at age 19, seven (1.7%) said at age 20, and 69 (17.1 %) said at age 21. Three youth (1.0%) thought they would leave after age 21, and 39 youth (9.7%) did not know.

### Where Did Youth Who Stayed in and Who Left the System Live?

Youth who exited the foster care system tended to live with family or on their own. Figure 3 shows that those who left the system quite early, soon after age 17, tended to live with family. Among those who had left care, living with family members was the most common situation up until the final interview, when living more independently was the most common type of living situation. Living more independently was also the most common living situation for young people who remained in the foster care system, starting at age 18 years, 3 months (see figure 4). At age 17 youth lived a variety of places, the most common of which was congregate care facilities such as residential treatment programs. This means many youth transitioned quickly from congregate care to living more independently. Two youth were adopted.



### What Were the Circumstances of their Exits?

In response to a closed-ended question about whose idea it was to leave Children's Division custody, 97 youth (45.8% of 212) said it was their idea, 75 (35.4%) said it was the case manager's idea, 21 (9.9 %) said it was the judge's idea, nine (4.2%) said it was the family's idea, three (1.4%) did not know, and seven (3.3 percent) said it was someone else's idea. One youth should have been asked the question but was not due to interviewer error.

We grouped responses to the open-ended question about how their leaving came about into nine broad categories; a youth's answers could be coded in more than one category. Presented from most to least common, the categories are youth-initiated discharge (78, 39.2%), system-initiated discharge (56, 28%), discharge without notice (33, 16.6%), achievement of goals (32, 16.6%), age-related release (29, 14.5%), being thrown out of the system (15, 7.5%), discharge to live with family (12, 6%), other circumstances (12, 6%), and adoption (3, 1.5%). When youth initiated their own discharge it occurred by asking authorities for a discharge, forcing the release in some way, running away, or indicating a desire to go home. Typical responses by these youth were "I left my foster home and never came back," "I was sent to my aunt and uncle, but I ran away," and "I ran away from placement so they released me when I turned 18."

In their open-ended answers, many youth noted that their discharge was initiated by the Children's Division or the court, but many did not understand why they had been discharged. "I'm not really sure [how it happened]. It's just what they recommended when I went to court." "I went to court and it just happened." "It just happened. My case manager went to court, came home, and said I had been [released]." Some of these youth also indicated that they did not want to leave. One youth stated, "I thought my worker could get me back in if I needed it. But she talked me into thinking I was ready to be out."

The youth who said that they had been discharged without notice indicated that they did not know that they had been discharged, did not understand their discharge process, or had simply been discharged without being told. One youth stated, "They just sent me a letter telling me I was out of custody." Another said, "My caseworker quit, but before she left she got me out of custody, but no one ever told me, so I called and they said I was out."

Youth who described being thrown out of the system said it happened because they had been jailed, did not have a foster home, had gotten pregnant or their girlfriend had gotten pregnant, or simply that they had been thrown out.

### Did Youth Who Left Want to Leave the Foster Care System?

Of the 210 young people interviewed after leaving the foster care system who were asked if they wanted to leave, 187 (90.4%) said they did. Three youth should have been asked the question but were not due to interviewer error.

### Why Did Youth Want to Leave the State's Custody?

Youth who said they wanted to leave care at the time of exit were asked why. Their open-ended responses were categorized into five reasons: dislike or frustration with the system (76, 39%), a desire for independence (55, 28.2%), failure of the Children's Division to provide services (42, 21.5%), a desired change in circumstances (43, 22%), and other reasons (6, 3.1%).

Answers reflecting dislike or frustration with the foster care system included the following: "They wasn't doing nothing." "I can't stand those people." "So I can just get those people off my back. I just said release me." For some youth their frustration with the system was attributable to the lack of a relationship with their caseworker. For example, one youth residing in an apartment subsidized by the Children's Division, stated: "I had not talked to any of my

workers in 5 months or so. They sent me a letter addressed to Cheryl. I was getting checks, but they did not even know my name. I was ready to be done with them.” Responses related to the system’s failure to deliver services included the following: “I could never get a hold of my caseworker or anyone else. They wanted to put me in ILP (an independent living placement), but I didn’t even want to do that because it was hard enough to talk to anyone at the Children’s Division.” “They were not really helping me much anymore. All of my services had been cut.” “The Children’s Division caused more problems than they helped.” “They did not give me any services. I was to have surgery and they did not let me go to surgery. My leg is still not right. I can go to surgery on my own.”

Of the youth who wanted to leave because they desired a change in circumstances, the comment, “I just wanted to return home” was stated numerous times. In addition, some youth experienced negative living environments while in foster care and did not feel supported by the Children’s Division. As one youth stated, “I was sick of the way my foster mom treated me and they would not do anything about it.” Others indicated, “The situation was not good in my [foster] home” and even, “They are dumb. All they cared about was getting paid. They didn’t care about me or the kids.” One youth wanted to obtain employment but the location of his relative foster home prevented him from accomplishing that goal: “I couldn’t get a job because my grandparents live in the middle of nowhere.” Many of the youth felt that their age or circumstances called for a different living environment than what was being providing for them. One youth stated that he was “too old” and “tired of being in homes.” A young woman stated she “just wanted to return home. I did not like being in custody with a baby.”

## Discussion

This study is the first to examine systematically the exit from foster care system for older youth in a state where they could remain in custody until age 21. Four findings deserve further comment. (1) Many older youth left in unplanned ways that were not consistent with agency expectations. (2) Most older youth who left the system wanted to leave because of their frustrations with it. (3) Older youth with externalizing behavior problems were most likely to leave care early. (4) Youth who stayed in the system were often living on their own in the community, whereas youth who left the system were often living with family.

Similar to anecdotal reports from other sources, this study found that some young people were being discharged from foster care without notice and for what appear to be arbitrary reasons, such as reaching age 17 or 18. Oversight is needed from supervisors to ensure that youth are not prematurely discharged when the system does not require it. The system should respond as if it expects youth who cannot return home or who are not adopted to remain in care until they turn 21. All workers, judges, and youth should be informed that there is not an automatic age for discharge, and when age is recommended as the reason for discharge by any party, the suggestion should be challenged. The data also suggest that efforts to increase the mandatory exit age from foster care in some states from 18 to 21 should be accompanied by substantial, ongoing efforts to implement efforts to encourage decision makers to keep youth in care. Otherwise, youth may continue to be discharged at age 18.

Staying in care should also be made more tolerable for older youth. In this study, youth reported wanting to leave care because they were frustrated with the system or were not having their needs met. At one level, this calls for basic quality monitoring procedures, to ensure, for example, that older youth are being visited by their foster care case managers. Communication between child welfare authorities and older youth needs tremendous improvement regarding resources, availability of services, and discharge planning. At another level, it calls for efforts to increase involvement of youth in their case management, providing them a greater voice and decision making authority as they grow older, especially after age 18.

Youth who had externalizing behavior problems were less likely to remain in care and receive the assistance and services that the foster care system could provide them. Their early exits from care raise the question of whether the system is getting rid of youth with behavior problems or youth with behavior problems are voluntarily exiting the system. Both are likely. The question for decision makers should not be whether these youth deserve future services, but whether they would benefit from continued services such as structured living situations, supervised and subsidized apartment living, case management, substance abuse treatment, and Medicaid eligibility. The services that might address the challenges facing these youth, should they choose to remain in care, need to be discussed with youth and made available to them.

Prior research has shown that youth who stay in care longer fare better (Courtney & Dworsky, 2000). This study occurred in a state where youth can remain until the age of 21, but many did not. Data here suggests many youth left because they were frustrated with what they perceived to be poor service. Improvements in service to this population may lead to more youth voluntarily staying in the system longer and receiving its benefits, such as subsidized housing and Medicaid. It will be a hard sell to convince youth to remain in a system that treats youth poorly. For those who want to leave, their transition should be positive and not occur due to misinformation or negative experiences.

During the course of the study, youth who stayed in the foster care system were often moved into independent living placements in the community. In this age of increased programmatic and placement options for older youth, being in care no longer means only living in nonkin foster homes or congregate care. Older youth can often receive some of the liberties they seek while remaining in the foster care system. Scattered-site apartment and transitional living programs may need to examine their policies to see if they are compatible with the needs of youth with externalizing behavior problems, because the opportunity to remain in the care system may depend on whether these youth can be served in these less-structured programs.

Independent living preparation programs may also need to prepare youth for the complexities of living with their families of origin as opposed to preparing youth solely for life on their own. Since many older youth leave the foster care system to live with relatives. The fact that so many youth returned home highlights the importance of family, as well as the desire that many older youth may have for reuniting with their family. Their families often serve as their safety net and for some reunification is their ultimate goal, even when it is not the system's goal.

Two youth in the study were adopted after age 17. This underscores the possibility of finding permanent adoptive homes for this population and the need to continue to seek permanent homes for them. Adoption may not be desired by all youth at this age, but is potentially life changing for those whom it is an acceptable option.

This study improves on prior research by its use of primary mixed-methods data, repeated interviews with youth to capture the story of their exit soon after it occurred, and multivariate examination of predictors of system exit. The reliance on youth reports is a strength of this study. Their voices have been absent in previous studies and their experiences are integral to understanding the successes and failures of the child welfare system. However, this study captures the experiences of youth from a single state and did not examine the views of case managers, judges, and other parties who may have viewed the older youth's exit from the foster care system differently. It also captured the experiences of youth from a single state.

Older youth, like other children and youth in foster care, are vulnerable despite their increasing age and autonomy. They are in the foster care system because they have experienced maltreatment and the temporary or permanent loss of their homes, families, and communities. Older youth in foster care also experience the typical challenges and transitions that other emerging adults face in contemporary society. Given their chronological, personal, and support



challenges, older youth removed from their homes by the court should be able to rely on the foster care system to provide them with stability, support, and needed services. Foster care system decision makers, who listen to youth, respond to their needs and respectfully and actively partner with them can aid them in their transition to greater independence.

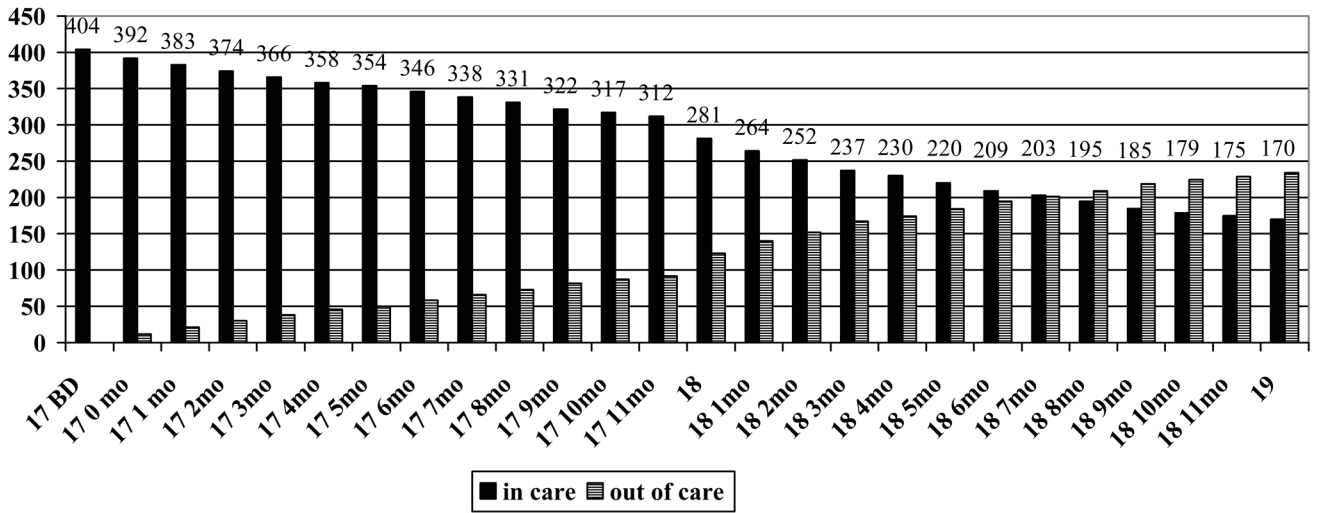
### Acknowledgements

This work was supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (R01 MH61404 and P30 MH068579).

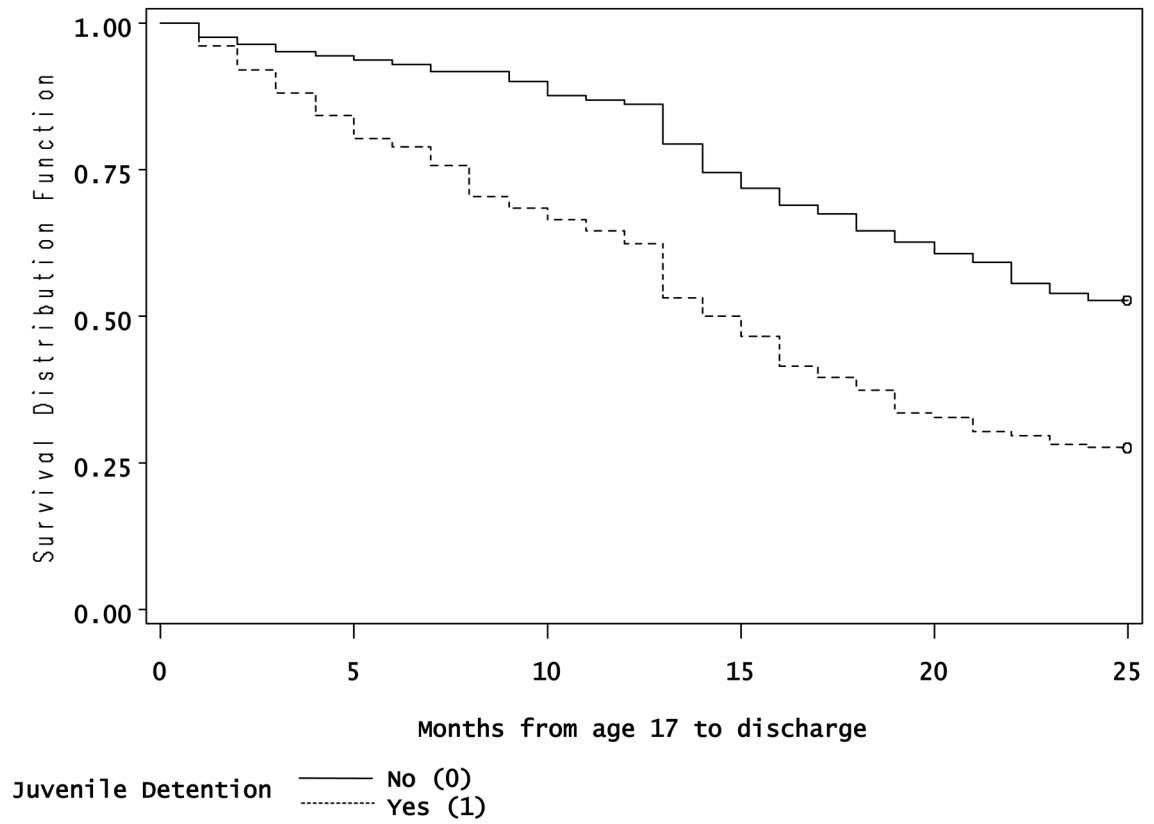
### References

- Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment. [Retrieved January 30, 2007]. from <http://www.caseylifeskills.org/>
- Auslander WF, McMillen JC, Elze D, Thompson R, Jonson-Reid M, Stiffman A. Mental health problems and sexual abuse among adolescents in foster care: Relationship to HIV risk behaviors and intentions. *AIDS and Behavior* 2002;6(4):351–359.
- Bernstein, DP.; Fink, L. *Child Trauma Questionnaire: A retrospective self-report*. San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation; 1998.
- Caspi A, Moffitt TE, Thornton A, Freedman D, Amell JW, Harrington H, et al. The life history calendar: A research and clinical assessment method for collecting retrospective event-history data. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research* 1996;6:101–114.
- Collins ME. Transition to adulthood for vulnerable youths: A review of research and implications for policy. *Social Service Review* 2001;75(2):271–291.
- Courtney ME, Barth RP. Pathways of older adolescents out of foster care: Implications for independent living services. *Social Work* 1996;41(1):75–83. [PubMed: 8560322]
- Courtney ME, Dworsky A. Early outcome for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child and Family Social Work* 2006;11(3):209–219.
- Courtney ME, Piliavin I, Grogan-Kaylor A, Nesmith A. Foster youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare* 2001;80:685–717. [PubMed: 11817658]
- Dworsky, A.; Courtney, ME. Self-sufficiency of former foster youth in Wisconsin: Analysis of unemployment insurance wage data and public assistance data. United States Department of Health and Human Services; 2000 [Retrieved February 23, 2005]. from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/fosteryouthW100/#s1>
- Helzer JE, Spitznagel EL, McEvoy L. The predictive validity of lay Diagnostic Interview Schedule diagnosis in the general population: a comparison with physician examiners. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 1987;44:1069–1077. [PubMed: 3689095]
- Horwitz SM, Hoagwood K, Stiffman AR, Summerfeld T, Weisz JR, Costello EJ, et al. Reliability of the Services Assessment for Children and Adolescents. *Psychiatric Services* 2001;52:1088–1094. [PubMed: 11474056]
- McMillen JC, Tucker J. The status of older adolescents at exit from out-of-home care. *Child Welfare* 1999;78:339–360. [PubMed: 10335595]
- McMillen JC, Zima BT, Scott LD Jr, Auslander WF, Munson MR, Ollie MT, et al. The prevalence of psychiatric disorders among older youths in the foster care system. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 2005;44:88–95. [PubMed: 15608548]
- Mendel D. Fostered or Forgotten? *Advocacy* 2001;3(2):4–13.
- Nixon, R.; Jones, MG. *Improving transitions to adulthood for youth served by the foster care system: A report on the strengths and needs of existing aftercare services*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America; 2000.
- Robins, L.; Cottler, L.; Bucholz, K.; Compton, W. *Diagnostic Interview Schedule for DSM-IV*. St. Louis, MO: Washington University; 1995.
- Russell, DEH. *The secret trauma: Incest in the lives of girls and women*. NY: Basic Books; 1986.
- Shirk, M.; Stangler, G. *On their own*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; 2004.

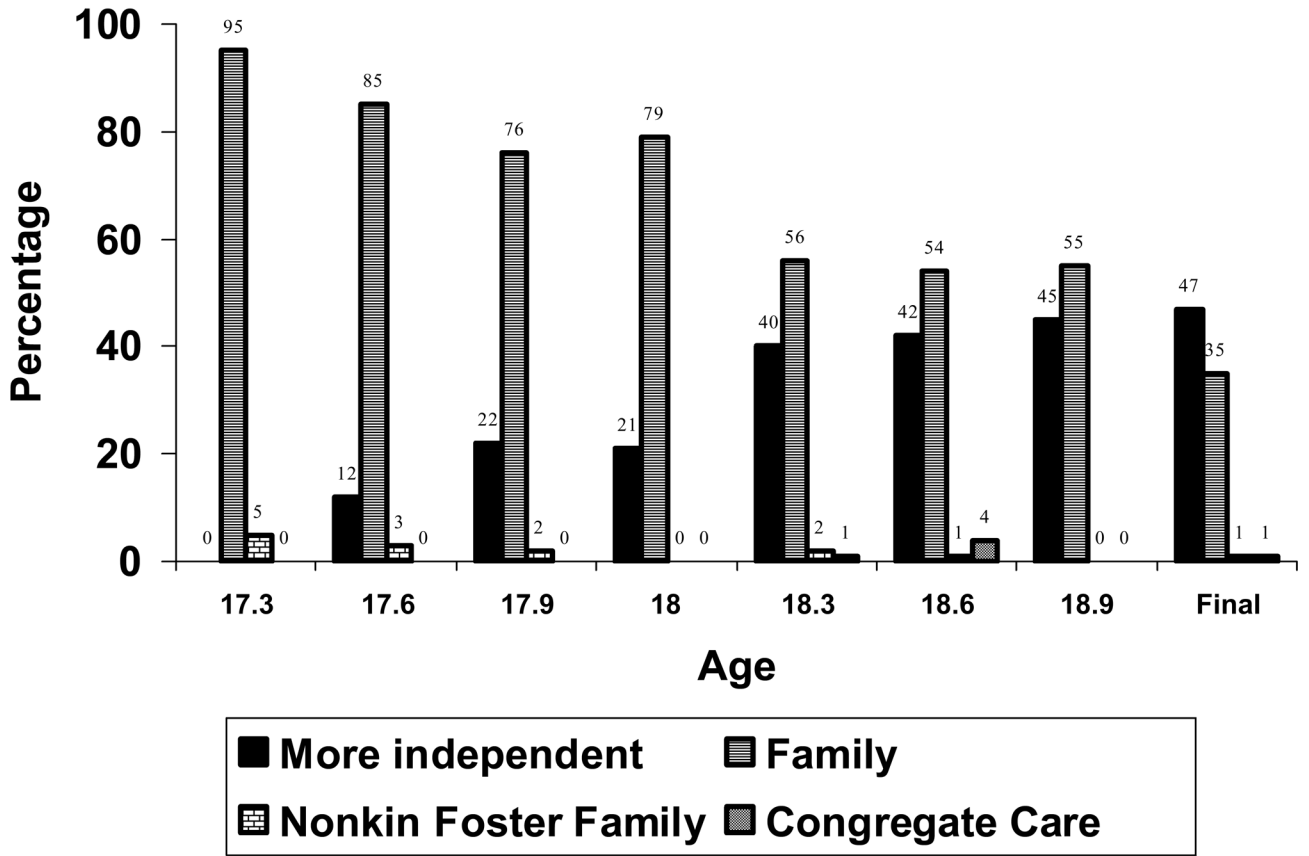
- Stiffman AR, Horwitz SM, Hoagwood K, Compton W, Cottler L, Bean DL, et al. The Service Assessment for Children and Adolescents (SACA): Adult and child reports. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 2000;39:1032–1039. [PubMed: 10939232]
- Strayhorn, CK. Longterm outcomes. *Forgotten children*. 2004a [Retrieved February 23, 2005]. from <http://www.window.state.tx.us/forgottenchildren/forgottenchildren.pdf>
- Strayhorn, CK. The Texas foster care system. *Forgotten Children*. 2004b [Retrieved February 23, 2005]. from <http://www.window.state.tx.us/forgottenchildren/forgottenchildren.pdf>
- United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. *Title IV-E Independent Living Programs: A decade in review*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; 1999.



**Figure 1.** Number of youth in and out of the foster care system from the 17th birthday to the month of the 19 birthday (N = 404). Numbers represent number in care.  
 Note: no youth exited care and later re-entered care

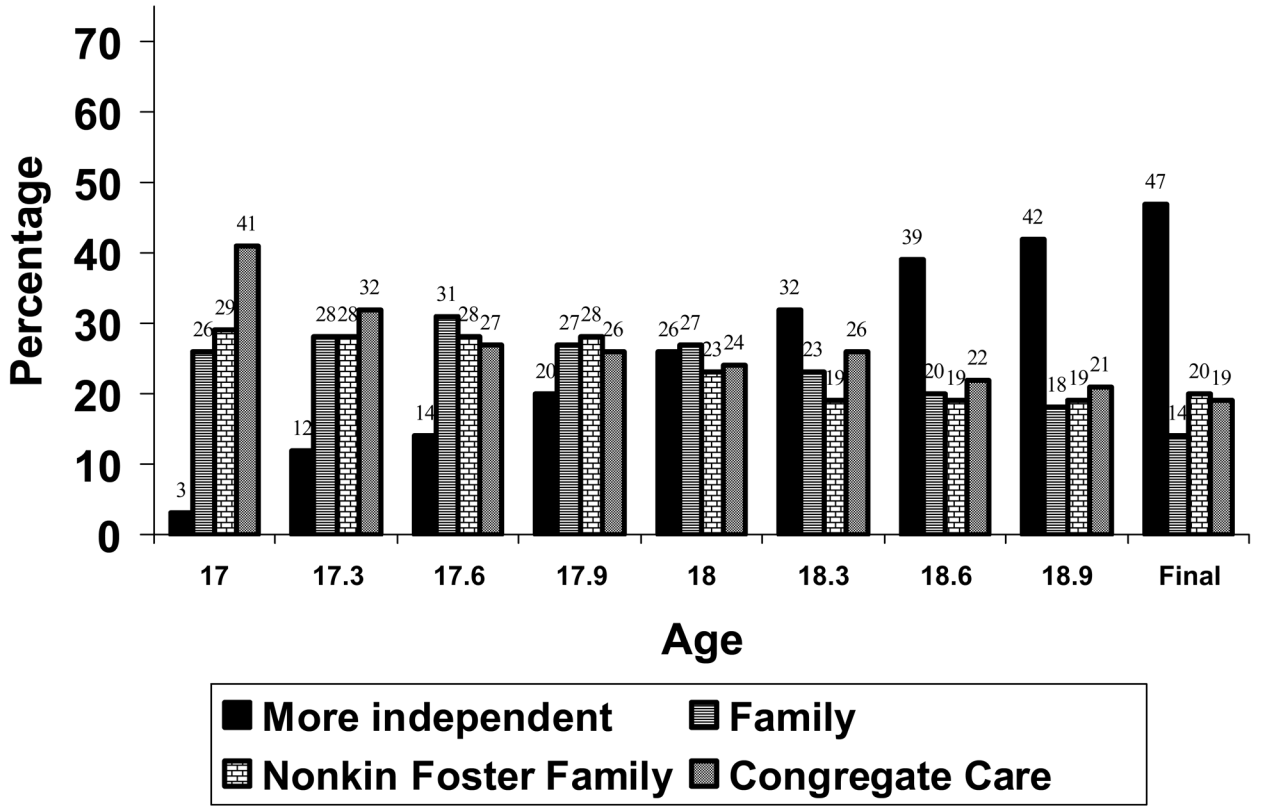


**Figure 2.**  
Rates of staying in the foster care system from age 17 to 19 by whether youth had a history of being in juvenile detention.



**Figure 3.**  
Where youth lived, among those who had left the foster care system.





**Figure 4.** Where youth lived, among those in the foster care system.

**Table 1**  
Bivariate Cox Regression Results Predicting Time to Exit from the Foster Care System.

Predictor Variable	B	SE ( $\beta$ )	p	Hazard Ratio
Youth of color	-0.62	0.13	<.001	0.54
Male	-0.10	0.13	.455	0.91
Placement at age 17*				
Biological or adoptive home	1.10	0.23	<.001	2.99
Congregate care	0.03	0.17	.845	1.03
More independently	0.33	0.38	.382	1.39
Other relative	0.08	0.20	.700	1.08
History of physical abuse	0.07	0.13	.590	1.07
History of physical neglect	-0.22	0.13	.102	0.80
History of intrusive sexual abuse	0.25	0.16	.109	1.28
Age 17 psychotropic medication use	0.00	0.14	.993	1.00
Alcohol use in previous 6 months <sup>†</sup>				
1-5 times	0.28	0.15	.066	1.32
$\geq 6$ times	0.94	0.19	<.001	2.56
Marijuana use in previous 6 months	0.46	0.16	.005	1.58
History of disruptive behavioral disorder	0.29	0.13	.026	1.34
History of major depressive episode	-0.11	0.15	.454	0.89
History of ADHD	0.17	0.16	.276	1.19
History of mania	0.15	0.26	.574	1.16
History of juvenile detention	0.76	0.13	<.001	2.15
Geographic region <sup>‡</sup>				
St. Louis County	0.54	0.18	.002	1.71
Southwest Missouri	0.71	0.19	<.001	2.04
St. Louis exurbs	0.94	0.20	<.001	2.55
Number of placements in previous year <sup>§</sup>				
Two	0.51	0.17	.003	1.66
Three	0.63	0.21	.003	1.88
Four	0.77	0.24	.001	2.17
Five	0.83	0.28	.003	2.29
Six or more	0.64	0.25	.010	1.91
Had lived on the street	0.34	0.17	.042	1.40

Note.--- ADHD = attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder.

\* Compared with youth living with nonkin foster families at age 17.

<sup>†</sup> Compared with youth who did not use alcohol.

<sup>‡</sup> Compared with youth from St. Louis City.

<sup>§</sup> Compared with youth in one placement.

**Table 2**  
Multivariable Cox Regression Analysis Results Predicting Time to Exit from the Foster Care System, with Variables Remaining after the Manual Backward Elimination.

Predictor Variable	B	SE ( $\beta$ )	p	Hazard Ratio
Placement at Age 17 <sup>*</sup>				
Biological or adoptive home	0.93	0.25	.000	2.54
Congregate care	0.06	0.18	.737	1.06
More independently	0.28	0.39	.465	1.33
Other relative	0.21	0.21	.319	1.23
Alcohol use in previous 6 months <sup>†</sup>				
1 to 5 times	0.17	0.16	.278	1.19
$\geq 6$ times	0.49	0.21	.017	1.63
History of juvenile detention	0.63	0.15	<.001	1.88
Geographic region <sup>‡</sup>				
St. Louis County	0.51	0.18	.005	1.67
Southwest Missouri	0.61	0.20	.002	1.84
St. Louis exurbs	1.00	0.21	<.001	2.71
Number of placements in previous year <sup>§</sup>				
Two	0.46	0.18	.011	1.58
Three	0.41	0.23	.067	1.51
Four	0.67	0.25	.007	1.96
Five	0.54	0.29	.067	1.71
Six or more	0.15	0.28	.593	1.16

\* Compared with youth living with nonkin foster families at age 17.

<sup>†</sup> Compared with youth who did not use alcohol.

<sup>‡</sup> Compared with youth from St. Louis City.

<sup>§</sup> Compared with youth in one placement.