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Will I Make It on My Own? Voices and Visions of 17-Year-Old Youth in Transition

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Abstract Voices and Visions of Youth in Transition, a longitudinal transformative youth-centered research study, examines the experiences and thoughts of youth as they transition out of foster care at the ages of 17, 19, and 21. Qualitative and quantitative survey inquiries were used to attain an understanding of the experiences of 198 youth in foster care who were 17 years old during the first wave of data collection. Nine critical areas related to the transition out of foster care were examined: education; employment; housing; high-risk behavior; access to health insurance; social connections with adults, family, and friends; the transition plan; transition concerns; and personal goals. The majority of youth reported the importance of resources, social support, and personal habits and skills as they prepare for the transition out of foster care. Youth also expressed concerns about being on their own without adequate support and not being able to make it on their own. This article highlights the study's findings from the first wave of data collection and how youth in transition are meaningfully engaged and empowered throughout the research process.

Keywords Foster care · Independent living · Youth in foster care · Child welfare · Life transition

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Introduction

Most youth look forward to their 18th birthday as a milestone celebration of freedom with new rights and privileges that they have never experienced before (Krinsky 2010). The transition from adolescence to adulthood has many young adults planning for a bright future often with the guidance and support of family members; however, for the 22,000 youth who age out of the foster care system each year in the United States (McCoy et al. 2011), this milestone birthday may not be much of a celebration. Although the transition between adolescence and adulthood often brings physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, youth who are transitioning out of foster care are faced with additional challenges as they plan for their transition into adulthood (Scannapieco et al. 2007). Youth encounter challenges to educational attainment, acquiring sustainable employment and housing, direct involvement in decision-making that affects their lives and future, avoiding high-risk behaviors, maintaining positive and close relationships, and obtaining adequate life skills training.

Youth in foster care are often at a greater educational disadvantage compared to youth in the general population (Zetlin et al. 2010). High school dropout rates are higher for youth in foster care than for those youth who are not in care, including youth who have not completed their GED (Berzin 2008). In a study examining the transition of youth leaving care, only 54 % of youth still enrolled in high school at the time they exited from care completed high school within 2.5–4 years (Osgood et al. 2010). Youth who do successfully complete their high school education are faced with the important decision as to whether they want to further their education. Although the evidence is compelling that post-secondary education can benefit youth by providing significantly higher lifetime wages, career

advancement potential, and overall enhanced quality of life (US Department of Education 2010), this decision can still be a difficult one because the pursuit of a post-secondary education presents many barriers for youth in foster care that may not be present for other youth. Some of these stressors include, but are not limited to, simultaneously attending classes, managing finances, acquiring social support, finding or keeping a home, staying in touch with family and friends, and finding or maintaining a job.

Financial independence is often reliant on successful completion of at least a general equivalency diploma (GED) or high school diploma. Because youth in foster care have shown lower rates of high school completion as well as lower rates of pursuing a post-secondary education, securing a job and income to meet the needs of independent living may be a difficult feat. Independent living needs, at the very minimum, include paying for food, clothing, housing, and transportation. Additional costs include paying for health care, insurance, and a post-secondary education. Because of the instability to financially meet these needs, youth who are exiting foster care find themselves on public assistance more often than youth who are not in foster care (Berzin 2008).

Youth in foster care are expected to overcome multiple independent living challenges during the transition out of foster and are often left to do so without adequate preparation and resources (Courtney et al. 2001). For many of these youth, major life decisions have been made throughout their lives by the child welfare system, more often than not, without their personal involvement (Antle et al. 2009). When considering the needs of youth preparing for the transition out of foster care, it is essential that youth not only are equipped with the necessary resources to thrive independently but also are directly involved in the planning and preparation of their transition plan. A transition plan is one of many ways that youth in foster care can become aware of the resources and supports that are available to them as they transition out of foster care and mature into adulthood. The development of a transition plan occurs during a youth-centered face-to-face meeting where the youth, case manager, and supportive adults discuss the options, goals, and services that can contribute to a youth's successful future upon leaving foster care. Because of the challenges youth experience after they leave foster care, it is essential that youth receive support, guidance, resources, and independent living skills training before this critical life transition. Being directly involved in one's transition plan is a way for youth to become advocates for themselves, their future plans, and the preparation leading up to it. Without a transition plan, youth can lack access to beneficial information and resources that will assist them as they transition into adulthood.

It is an unfortunate reality that the majority of youth with foster care experience have experienced maltreatment from at least one adult in their lives. As a result, many youth are temporarily or permanently displaced from family members and other people of significance to them (US Department of Health and Human Services 2013). These early experiences can be stressful to youth (Mitchell and Kuczynski 2010) and may contribute to negative outcomes, including involvement with crime and high risk behaviors (Berzin 2008). Many youth who have aged out of foster care have reported trying illegal drugs at least once (Cook et al. 1991) and, compared to youth who were not in foster care, are more likely to have witnessed shootings or experienced robberies (Berzin 2008). Other studies indicate that existing mental health and behavioral problems can contribute to the elevated high risk behaviors of these youth (Keller et al. 2010). While all youth are at risk for experimenting with high risk behaviors, youth in foster care are more likely to have experienced precarious situations or lived in environments that make them more prone to high risk behaviors.

The presence of caring, supportive adults can contribute to the positive well-being of youth during the transition out of foster care (Courtney et al. 2001). Having a strong social support network can assist youth in finding resources and services that they may no longer be able to access through the child welfare system (Propp et al. 2003). In a study evaluating the experiences of youth transitioning out of care, participants stressed the importance of social support prior to and in the midst of their transition into adulthood (Scannapieco et al. 2007). The study showed how stable relationships and social support are critical in providing a foundation for new, trusting relationships and replacing feelings of isolation and disconnect that youth may have once felt while in the foster care system. Being engaged in positive relationships can assist youth in developing the skills and knowledge necessary to live and function independently after aging out of foster care (Scannapieco et al. 2007).

Acquiring basic life skills at an early age is necessary for a youth's successful transition into independent living (Casey Family Programs 2013). Most youth aging out of foster care will juggle responsible decision-making, money management, and goal setting while trying to pursue an education and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships (Osgood et al. 2010). Youth who receive life skills training before living independently (e.g. money management, consumer skills, credit management, education, and employment) have been found to have better outcomes than those who do not as they age out of foster care (Cook 1994; Lindsey and Ahmed 1999). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for youth aging out of foster care to be left without practical life skills and training as they find themselves transitioning out of foster care and into independent living.

The Context of the Study

In response to the alarmingly high rates of victimization, homelessness, unemployment, and other negative well-being outcomes experienced by youth who have transitioned out of foster care, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (PL 106-109) was passed into law in 1999 (US Department of Health and Human Services 2001). The act was established to provide states with financial assistance to develop programs, training, and services to assist youth in developing much-needed independent living skills as they prepared to transition out of the foster care system. On October 1, 2010, the federal government launched a nationwide longitudinal data collection, the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), to evaluate the service delivery and program effectiveness of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

The National Youth in Transition Database is a federally mandated data collection requiring all states to track, monitor, and report the independent living services received and perceived by youth as they transition out of foster care. The federal NYTD data collection quantitatively measures six outcomes: financial self-sufficiency; experience with homelessness; educational attainment; positive connections with adults; high-risk behavior; and access to health insurance (US Department of Health and Human Services 2008). Federal law requires every state to gather information from all youth in foster care who turn 17 between October 2010 and September 2011 and then again when these youth are 19 and 21 years old. Public Law 106–169 at Section 477 mandates that if a state fails to comply with the reporting requirements, a penalty of 1–5 % will be applied to the state's annual Chafee Foster Care Independence Program allotment for each reporting period.

While the NYTD nationwide initiative provides an opportunity to examine the independent living services youth experience as they prepare for and transition out of foster care, further examination of the federal data collection's program evaluation methodology and design suggests that the established approach is limited in its ability to examine youth's intricate understandings of these experiences. The federal data collection may answer the "what" of program performance; however, it does not answer the "why" or "how" questions (US Department of Health and Human Services 2001). One of the primary objectives of this longitudinal study was to develop a mixed methods research design that included qualitative as well as quantitative inquiries. Incorporating open-ended questions will extend beyond the efforts of the NYTD data collection by providing the state with a more comprehensive understanding of youth's experiences. Qualitative inquiries will address the "why" and "how" of youth's experiences and will provide a more in-depth understanding of the services and resources youth need as they prepare for the transition out of foster care. It is important to know *what* challenges youth experience as they transition out of foster care; however, to promote effective change, it is essential to also answer *how* and *why* youth experience challenges to successful independent living.

Method

Research Framework

This longitudinal transformative mixed methods research study examines the independent living experiences of youth as they transition out of foster care. The primary objective of transformative research is to improve the situations of marginalized populations by recommending specific changes in social policy as a result of the research that has been conducted (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Many of the characteristics of a transformative framework are aligned with social work and its core principles: pertinence to issues of marginalization; intentional engagement of research participants in all phases of the research process; embracing and embedding ethics and values in the research; and a keen awareness of the possible social impact of the research (Mertens 2003). In this article, we discuss the preliminary findings from the first wave of data collection of a 5-year longitudinal study and the initial efforts to inform social policy and improve the situations of youth transitioning out of foster care.

Participants

Participant eligibility for this study was initially determined by the NYTD federal baseline population requirements (US Department of Health and Human Services 2008). Of the 287 youth who were invited to participate in this study, 198 youth (108 females, 90 males) completed the Voices and Visions of Youth in Transition survey. All participants were 17 years of age and in foster care at the time the survey was completed. The sample represents 24 % of the state's population of 17-year-old youth in care at the time the study was conducted. Overall the sample consisted of an equal representation of youth who were Caucasian (44 %) and African American (51 %).

The Voices & Visions of Youth in Transition Survey

The survey administered during the first wave of data collection examined nine critical areas related to the transition out of foster care: education; employment; housing;

high-risk behavior; access to health insurance; social connections with adults, family, and friends; the transition plan; transition concerns; and personal goals. The closed-ended inquiries from NYTD were incorporated into the FFY 2011 Voices and Visions of Youth in Transition survey. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a large university in the Southeastern United States.

Data Collection

The 5-year longitudinal study began on October 1, 2010. This article reports the preliminary findings from the first wave of data collection, completed on September 30, 2011. All youth in the baseline population will be invited to complete a survey again when they are 19 and 21 years of age. Alternate versions of the survey will be developed for data collection in these years. With each successive wave of data collection, as rapport grows with the youth, greater emphasis will be placed on qualitative inquiry and exploration.

This longitudinal transformative research study involves a youth-centered approach during each wave of data collection. The first wave of data collection includes five phases which are intended to establish a rapport with participants and provide a personable approach in engaging youth as active participants.

Phase One

Participants were mailed an information package 3 weeks before their 17th birthday. The information package included a birthday card and letter explaining the research project and the upcoming survey. The purpose of this phase was to: (i) acknowledge the youth's birthday; (ii) familiarize the youth with the research team; (iii) notify the youth about the data collection; (iv) prepare youth for the administration of the survey; and (v) minimize any potential ambiguity about the intentions behind the data collection.

Phase Two

Phone calls were made to youth 2 weeks before their 17th birthday to minimize ambiguity and notify the youth of the study's purpose, procedure, benefits, remuneration, and the transition resource kit. This approach also provided youth with an opportunity to ask any questions about the survey and indicate whether they would like to participate in the survey by phone, by mail, or internet. Accommodations were offered to youth with special needs in an effort to accurately capture their survey responses.

Phase Three

The survey was administered to the youth as determined by the preferred method indicated by the youth in phase two. If contact with a youth was not made in phase two, the survey was mailed to the youth.

Phase Four

If a survey was mailed to a youth and it was not returned within 10 days, a follow-up phone call was made to the youth. Youth were advised that taking the survey was optional and the purpose of the phone call was to confirm receipt of the survey and answer any questions they may have had. In many cases the youth had not received the survey because they had recently moved from the address to which the survey had been mailed. In these situations, another survey was delivered.

Phase Five

Youth who participated in the survey were mailed a gift card and a transition resource kit. In addition to providing participants with a monetary incentive for the time they invested in the study, we also believed it essential to provide youth with resources that could assist them during their transition out of foster care. The transition resource kit contained valuable information and resources (e.g. materials from a national network for young people in foster care, a list and eligibility criteria for scholarships, and a booklet outlining the independent living resources and services available to them). In addition, youth were provided with a link to the study's nationally recognized youth-centered website which provides useful resources on a wide array of services and opportunities for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Data Analysis

SPSS, a quantitative software, and MAXQDA, a qualitative software, were used to examine the data using quantitative and qualitative analysis. In reference to the latter, particular attention was paid to the themes that emerged through youth's reports of experiences, concerns, and aspirations related to the transition out of foster care.

Rapport Building

Youth in foster care represent a vulnerable population, many of whom have had their trust violated by adults. Establishing a rapport with youth in foster care can provide a foundation that assists in building a relationship of trust. Rapport was built with participants before, during, and

after the first wave of data collection through telephone conversations, mail-outs, newsletters, listserv announcements, email correspondence, website articles, and the baseline survey administration method. Additional efforts to maintain rapport and contact with participants included follow-up phone calls, focus groups, and email correspondence during FFY 2012.

Engaging and Empowering Youth in Research

A state youth advisory panel consisting of older youth in and formerly in foster care was established to provide youth with opportunities to share their feedback and recommendations on the survey questions, research methodology, and youth-friendly dissemination methods. Youth in the state who are transitioning out of foster care not only are invited to serve as active participants in the survey process but also are encouraged to participate in county youth groups and on the state youth advisory board in an effort to acquire a more detailed understanding of the data and to learn how to use this information to create meaningful change. Establishing a rapport with youth through personal communication, sharing independent living resources and survey findings with them, and involving them as informed advocates and disseminators of data are fundamental to our youth-centered approach. When asked for their feedback on the experience of serving on the youth advisory panel for the research study, one youth member replied:

> Being a part of the team shows me that I am able to be a voice, a leader, and share with everyone what (the research study) is doing in regards to survey results and statistics, as well as how the results are being shared with caseworkers, (child welfare) management personnel, and federal officials who can use that information to help change and advocate for ways to help youth transition out of foster care smoothly and with a sense of hope and connection with those who helped them get to where they are today. Personally I take the leadership role very seriously. I like to be able to say, "I am on an advocacy board for youth in foster care," when someone asks why I am asking for Saturday off, or why I have to travel far to do this. I also believe that it is not about where you are that makes a difference; you could be in any state, any county, and make that difference. To me having the advisory panel is important because they are the voice of youth (personal correspondence, July 24, 2014).

Inviting youth to share their thoughts, stories, and experiences in a more expansive way not only enhances the quality of the data collected but also creates a meaningful connection with youth, demonstrating to them that their experiences are not merely data that is arbitrarily quantified into research.

Results

Education

Ninety-one percent of youth were currently enrolled and attending high school, GED classes, post high school vocational training, or college. Most of these youth were likely enrolled in high school or GED classes as all youth were 17 years of age and only 5 % had obtained their high school diploma or GED. All youth who reported their expected graduation year indicated they expected to graduate within 5 years of their 17th birthday. Most of these youth reported they expected to graduate within two years, proposing an age of nineteen at the time of graduation.

When youth were asked what they need to finish high school, obtain their GED, or go to college/university, the most common themes were personal habits and skills (e.g. good grades, staying in school, and motivation), resources (e.g. financial support and transportation), and social support. The need for a tutor was spontaneously reported by 10 % of youth who completed the survey.

Employment

The majority of youth reported they had neither a full-time job (95 %) nor a part-time job (84 %). Although it is expected that most of these youth would not have had a full-time job due to their age and their full-time enrollment in school, the low percentage of youth who had part-time jobs suggests that many youth were not earning an additional income nor acquiring job experience. Only a quarter of youth reported they had completed an apprenticeship, internship, or other on-the-job training (either paid or unpaid) in the last year.

When asked what they need to find or retain a job, the most common themes that emerged were the need for resources (e.g. transportation, job listings, a home, a computer, guidance, government documents, and finances), acquiring and building upon personal habits and skills (e.g. personal responsibility and a good attitude), and social support. Youth reported the need for respectful relationships and social support from a variety of individuals, such as family, friends, mentors, social networks, peers, and caseworkers.

Housing

One out of every five youth reported being homeless at some point in their lives. Twice as many females (14 %) as males (7 %) had experienced homelessness.

When asked about housing needs as they move into adulthood, the two most common themes that emerged from youth's reports were the need for resources (e.g. income, transportation, and house listings) and social support to find or retain a home.

High-Risk Behavior

Seventy-five percent of youth reported they had not been confined in a jail, prison, correctional facility, or juvenile or community detention facility in connection with allegedly committing a crime. Males (12.5 %) and females (12.5 %) equally reported being confined in a jail, prison, correctional facility, or juvenile or community detention facility in connection with allegedly committing a crime.

There were clear differences between races in terms of being confined in a jail, prison, correctional facility, or juvenile or community detention facility in connection with allegedly committing a crime. Nearly twice as many African Americans (16 %) as Caucasians (9 %) had been confined in a jail, prison, correctional facility, or juvenile or community detention facility in connection with allegedly committing a crime.

Less than a quarter of youth reported they had referred themselves or someone had referred them for an alcohol or drug abuse assessment or counseling. No major gap existed between males (8 %) and females (10 %) or between Caucasians (9 %) and African Americans (8 %) in terms of referring themselves or being referred by someone else for an alcohol or drug abuse assessment or counseling.

Access to Health Insurance

Eighty-three percent of youth reported they were currently receiving Medicaid; however all youth, unless an individual was not a legal citizen of the United States, were entitled to Medicaid coverage at the time of the data collection. It is possible that some youth were enrolled in Medicaid and were not aware that this was the case. When youth were asked if they had health insurance other than Medicaid, 11 % reported they had other health insurance. Nine percent reported their other health insurance included coverage for medical services, 8 % reported their other health insurance included coverage for mental health services, and 8 % reported their other health insurance included coverage for prescription drugs.

Social Connections with Adults, Family, and Friends

Ninety-one percent of youth reported they had at least one adult in their life, other than their caseworker, to whom they could go for advice or emotional support. All of these youth reported the adult with whom they had the closest trusting, supportive, and unconditional relationship. Birth parents were reported most frequently by youth as the relationship in which they had the most trust and support. The second and third most frequently reported relational connections were, respectively, the foster parent/former foster parent relationship and the sibling relationship. Almost all of the youth shared what they need to help them keep in touch with friends and/or family. More than half of the youth reported the need for a cell phone to stay connected with their family and friends. The need for a computer, transportation, an income, positive and respectful relationships, and visiting opportunities were also reported as important resources to stay connected with family and friends.

The Transition Plan

PL 110-351 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2002) states that a personalized transition plan must be developed with the youth during the 90-day-period prior to the youth's emancipation from foster care. When asked about their role in their transition plan, 60 % of youth reported they were either not aware of their transition plan or did not know if they played a role in the development of their transition plan. Seventeen percent of youth reported they were involved in their transition plan but did not lead it, 11 % reported they led their transition plan, and 6 % reported they were not involved in their transition plan. Because youth were 17 years of age when the survey was completed, it is possible that many were not aware of their transition plan because their caseworker had not yet introduced it to them. This question was pragmatically incorporated into the survey to raise youth consciousness about this policy and their right to receive a transition plan before their transition out of care.

Concerns About the Transition Out of Foster Care and Life After Foster Care

When asked about concerns related to the transition out of foster care or life after foster care, the majority of youth expressed concerns related to being on their own without support, having adequate financial resources, and being afraid of the unknown.

Housing concerns such as, "Where am I going to go?" and "I don't have anywhere to go." frequently surfaced in youth's reports when discussing their concerns about the transition out of foster care. Although not all youth explicitly stated housing as a concern, it is likely that many youth implicitly were concerned about finding adequate housing, as nearly 50 % of youth reported having a home or an apartment as one of their five goals in the next

5 years. Responses to open-ended inquiries about housing needs included statements such as "Have my own house," "Focus on saving money to get a decent home," and "Find a place to live (somewhere that's cheap)."

Youth also reported fears of being left to fend for themselves without adequate support. For example, one youth reported, "Will I have enough skills to be on my own?" Another youth reported, "I'm not sure of where to go and how to make it on my own." Other youth clearly identified their perceived inability to make it on their own, "I am not ready to leave."

Youth expressed similar sentiments when reporting concerns about money and finances. Reports included comments such as, "How will I survive if I don't get money to help me out other than when I get a job?" and "I'm worried about how I'm going to be financially because as of right now I have no income at all."

The lack of clarity around available information and resources was also implicit in youth's concerns about what their life would be like after they transitioned out of foster care. Youth reports included responses such as "Will my life be different. If so, how?", "What will it be like for me?", and "Yes I do have a concern about leaving foster care because if I leave foster care I feel like I won't really make it in life."

Personal Goals

All but one youth reported personal goals they wanted to achieve in the next 5 years. The three most common goals were graduating high school, attending college/university, and starting a career. The five most reported careers were the military, doctor, lawyer, nurse, and business owner.

Nearly 50 % of youth reported a goal related to forming or building relationships. Youth reports included goals related to building a family (e.g. "Starting a family" and "Have a family"); reconnecting with family (e.g. "Look for mom, brothers and sisters" and "Work on my relationship with family"); getting married (e.g. "Get married" and "Get married after college"); having children (e.g. "Have kids" and "Have children"); and providing for siblings and/or parents (e.g. "Get custody of my sister," "Help my little brother out of foster care," "Help my mom get money," "Get my mother a better life," and "Help my mom keep and maintain a home").

Other goals included obtaining a driver's license, establishing goals, being connected to one's faith, having financial security and success, pursuing hobbies, experiencing important life events, having a better quality of life, improving personal habits and skills, becoming self-responsible/independent, acquiring transportation, traveling, and volunteering.

Discussion

In this article, we have presented the preliminary findings from the Voices and Visions of Youth in Transition research study. The NYTD federally-mandated data collection precipitated the need for a more exhaustive research study to learn about youth's perceptions of transitioning out of foster care and their perceived challenges and needs related to independent living. While the information obtained solely from the NYTD data collection can be useful to child-serving agencies to define what youth in foster care generally experience as they age out of foster care, it does not provide deeper insight into the nuances of these youth's lived experiences.

Developing a mixed methods research study that incorporates closed-ended and open-ended questions serves as an important first step toward better understanding the "how" and "why" of youth experiences related to the transition out of foster care. The use of qualitative inquiries was a pragmatic decision which elicited spontaneous reports from youth about their perceived needs and experiences of the transition out of foster care and their dreams for the future. Few studies have asked youth directly, in an open-ended format, about their transition experiences. We learned that when provided with an opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts, youth are willing to share valuable information about preparing for the transition out of foster care that otherwise would not have been captured by closed-ended response sets. By asking open-ended questions we were also able to acquire additional information from youth about independent living challenges and needs as well as their future goals and dreams, a subject that has received minimal attention in research.

All but one youth reported goals that they wanted to attain within the next 5 years. In terms of educational outcomes and careers, the three most common goals reported by youth were graduating from high school, attending college/university, and starting a career. These goals are echoed in national studies in which seventy percent of youth in foster care have aspirations to attend college (McMillen et al. 2003), but the reality is that only 3–11 % of 25- to 34-year-olds formerly in foster care had completed a bachelor's degree (Casey Family Programs 2011) and less than 30 % of youth in foster care in the Midwest region were found to complete at least 1 year of college by age 23 and 24 (Courtney et al. 2010). These findings, elicited from qualitative inquiries, suggest that the failure of youth in foster care to pursue higher education is not related to a lack of initiative or personal desire but to external circumstances (e.g. housing or financial instability) that may hinder their ability to pursue their dreams.

The majority of youth had not completed any job related training, such as an apprenticeship or on-the-job training,

and only 16 % had a part-time job. While the youth surveyed were only 17 years of age, a lack of job skills and job experience may be a barrier to obtaining even modest part-time employment to supplement post-secondary financial aid, to pay for basic living expenses, and to serve as a foundation for obtaining employment in the future. This finding causes further concern for the future employability of youth, an assertion supported by a nationally recognized study conducted in five Midwestern states which found that youth formerly in foster care at age 23 and 24 are less likely to be employed compared to other youth and earn considerably lower wages (Courtney et al. 2010). One of the main objectives of our longitudinal study is to identify the challenges and supports that youth experience as they strive to realize their full potential while working to attain their post-secondary educational and career goals. It is anticipated that policy and practice can be better informed by identifying the supportive factors at work in helping youth successfully complete a post-secondary degree and finding employment in the future.

Maintaining connections with family was also a concern for many youth in this study. Youth identified birth parents and siblings as the primary adults who provide them with advice and emotional support. In regards to the latter, youth in foster care commonly report siblings as the most important adults in their lives (Courtney and Dworsky 2006). Other research has clearly indicated the importance of this fundamental biological connection and documented the effects and struggles youth experience when they are separated from their siblings and other allowed family members (Mitchell and Kuczynski 2010). In 2008, for the first time, the federal government specifically addressed the issue of sibling connections for children in foster care with the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. States are complying with this federal directive through a variety of programs and approaches, but we believe that an essential first step in addressing this often overlooked issue in child welfare policy and practice is to ask youth directly about their relationships with family members and to invite open feedback about the importance of these relationships.

As other researchers have reported (McCoy et al. 2008; Geenen and Powers 2007), and this study has shown, the majority of youth, when asked about their transition out of foster care, express concerns about being on their own without adequate support. Youth frequently specified insufficient financial resources as one of their primary concerns about not being able to make it on their own. Fifty percent of youth in our study reported having a home or an apartment as one of their main goals in the next 5 years. It may be inferred that youth consider having their own home or apartment an essential factor in possessing a sense of assurance that they are not going to be homeless once they

transition out of foster care. Twenty percent of youth in this study had been homeless at least once in their lives, and it is possible that these youth may fear becoming homeless again based on a lack of personal safety, stability, and security associated with homelessness. For many of our youth, the prospect of homelessness can loom large and, in some cases, may be an alternative they face if they are not able to obtain housing as young adults. Many youth were unclear about the resources that would be available to them upon transitioning out of foster care, and this lack of clarity added to their concerns about what their life would be like after leaving foster care.

It is clear that youth struggle with the expectation of achieving "independence" at an early age. The average age at which youth in the general population achieve full independence has risen over the past several decades (Berlin et al. 2010; Furstenberg 2010; Osgood et al. 2010). These findings identify numerous independent living challenges associated with transitioning out of foster care and suggest that "leaving home" at the age of 18 may no longer be a realistic benchmark for transitioning into adulthood. The current experience of the transition to adulthood is aptly captured below.

> Although today's young adults and their parents value independence highly, both tolerate and even endorse a slower schedule for attaining economic and social maturity. In effect, what is becoming normal, if not normative, is that the age of eighteen, or even twenty-one, has lost its significance as a marker of adult status. The transition to adulthood is drawn out over a span of nearly a decade and consists of a series of smaller steps rather than a single swift and coordinated one (Berlin et al. 2010, p. 4).

Youth in the study stated that they were concerned about their futures and asked the question, "Will I make it own my own?" The Fostering Connections Act provides funding to assist states in supporting youth in foster care between 18 and 21 years of age; however, this time frame may be insufficient to provide youth transitioning out of care with the best possible opportunity to lead successful lives as young adults. Other studies question the degree to which youth who have aged out of foster care can achieve successful lives as adults when they are expected to function independently at a much earlier age than youth in the general population who have the advantage of continued financial and social supports well into adulthood (Courtney et al. 2010). Child welfare policymakers may want to consider extending the time frame for which youth can continue to receive services and financial support to at least the age at which most youth in the general population are expected to complete their post-secondary education and start careers.

Asking youth about their personal aspirations, in addition to their perceived challenges, provided an understanding of ways to encourage and support youth as they pursue their goals over the next 5 years. Youth in foster care often hear negative statistics about the dismal possibility of successfully achieving their dreams and are regularly the object of uninformed stereotyping. Therefore, inviting youth to share their goals and aspirations in a supportive way is critical to ensuring that youth embrace an optimistic view of their future.

Throughout this longitudinal research study, youth will be asked about their identified goals, the challenges and supports that exist as they work in pursuit of them, and how successful they have been in achieving their goals at 19 and 21. This process demonstrates a genuine interest in youth's lives and their personal goals and serves as a meaningful way to stay connected with the youth as they transition into young adulthood. This information, as well as the identified independent living challenges shared by youth at age 19 and again at age 21 on the follow-up surveys, will provide us with additional insight about the supports they are receiving and how they are doing as they enter young adulthood. Subsequent waves of data collection will include an intensified emphasis on qualitative inquiries as a relationship with the study participants strengthens. It is anticipated this approach will lead to deeper insight into the nuances of youth's lived experiences.

Our initial findings suggest that 17-year-old youth face considerable challenges as they prepare for the transition out of foster care and also highlight the importance of transition planning and the provision of adequate resources to assist youth in successfully transitioning into independent living. Lastly, these voices of youth support the belief that a more protracted and intensive engagement and support of youth with full youth participation is essential to their future.

Limitations

This study exclusively focuses on the perceptions and experiences of 17-year-old youth in foster care who are preparing for the transition into adulthood, and then these same youth at 19 and 21 once they have transitioned out of foster care. It would also be of interest to examine the perceptions and experiences of youth at younger ages who are receiving services from the Chafee Independent Living Program. Various efforts were made to connect with youth and provide them with an opportunity to express their thoughts; however, none of the surveys were administered in-person. It may be beneficial to place a greater emphasis on administering future surveys in-person or via telephone to promote a more dyadic and personal interviewing experience. Lastly, youth's perceived needs may differ from their actual needs during the transition out of foster care. This longitudinal study will provide an opportunity to determine if youth's perceived needs at 17-years-old correspond or differ from their actual needs during and after the transition out of foster care.

More Than a Data Collection: Engaging and Empowering Youth as Informed Advocates

The engagement and empowerment of youth has been and continues to be a primary value of this study. Consistent with the objectives of transformative research which seek to improve the situations of marginalized populations by creating specific changes in social policy, findings from the first wave of data collection of our research study and the advocacy efforts of the state youth advisory panel have already impacted state policy and practice relating to youth transitioning out of foster care. Youth advisors have presented at state and national conferences to key decision makers with the power to shape child welfare policy (e.g. the Department of Social Services deputy director, the chair of the Family Court Judges Advisory Committee, executive staff of other state organizations involved in the child welfare field, and state representatives to the United States Congress). In addition, these youth have created resources to increase youth and adult awareness about the research findings and best practices for transition planning. This information has been distributed to youth, caseworkers, foster parents, and group home staff via conferences and presentations and is also available online (www.nytd stayconnected.com). Research findings often reach the policy and practice level only after months and years of wide dissemination. This study, with its youth-centered approach and involvement, impacts state practice on a daily basis and continues to do so, while the advocacy work of the youth advisory panel, supported by the survey findings, is receiving attention from policy makers.

This article addresses the findings from the first wave of data collection which provides us with a preliminary understanding of youth's experiences as they transition out of foster care. Subsequent waves of data collection will explore the voices of youth in more complexity, enhancing and better informing policy and practice in the area of foster care. By engaging and empowering youth in the process of research, youth radically learn that their voices can create effective change in policy and programming and ultimately function as the impetus that transforms their lives and the lives of the youth whom we serve.

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