Extended Foster Care in the United States: A Review of the Literature

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Social Work

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in collaboration with
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May 2019
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Dedication

To all the squirrels out there who believed in us.
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Abstract

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By

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Master of Social Work

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to examine the benefits of extending foster care services and to closely inspect if these benefits are in fact, substantial and successful in helping former foster youth as they navigate and progress into adulthood.

Inquiry: The objectives or goals of the study are to inquire about the impact of extending foster youth care and to determine in which areas the act could be improved.

Methods: The research articles were found through the ScienceDirect (Elsevier) search engine provided by the California State University, Northridge library website. Search terms used were: extended foster care, children and youth services, foster youth and mental health, substance use, victimization, education, housing, employment.

Results: The literature showed that there are promising developments in several areas of extended foster care. This review focuses on the following areas: mental health, substance use, victimization, education, housing, employment.

Keywords: extended foster care, children and youth services, foster youth and mental health, substance use, victimization, education, housing, employment.
Introduction

Foster youth are among the most at-risk populations in the United States for delinquent behavior, victimization, housing instability, low college graduation rates, substance use, and mental health issues. These individuals become stripped of opportunity to thrive when their home-life is turned upside down. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017), 61% of children had experienced neglect, 34% had a parent who engaged in drug abuse and 13% were subjected to physical abuse. Approximately 25,000 foster youth exit every year so it is imperative that they are receiving quality services to prepare them for a hopeful future (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013).

Any child, youth or adolescent affiliated with the child welfare and foster care system has more than likely been negatively impacted by such factors as: abandonment, physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse (Kerker & Dore, 2006). Being a current or former foster youth comes with a variety of challenges. These issues do not simply come to a halt because the individual reaches the age of 18 and no longer qualifies for services. This transitional period is known as aging out of the foster care system (Singer et al., 2013).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was implemented to allow states to extend foster care service which are needed to alleviate the burdens that this population face. The passage of this bill has led to numerous changes in policies and procedures in the child welfare system which are intended to benefit youth as they transition from care to independence.
These new practices are a good start, but in order for them to be the most beneficial, they have to become more accessible. This will require knowledge and advocacy on the part of service providers who can assist youth in take advantage of the new programs that best fit their individual needs.

This review of the literature is intended to add to the current body of knowledge regarding how extended foster care can benefit youth aging out of the foster care system in the life domains of mental health, substance abuse, victimization, education, housing and employment.
Method

The research articles were found through the ScienceDirect (Elsevier) search engine provided by the California State University, Northridge library website. Keywords used were: extended foster care, children and youth services, foster youth and mental health, substance use, victimization, education, housing, employment. Additional articles were found within the references of the original articles.
Results

Mental health

Foster youth who are aging out of care often have mental health challenges. Factors that can contribute to these challenges include exposure to domestic violence and drug use (Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000), as well as biological predispositions to mental illness (Kerker & Dore, 2006). These factors may become exacerbated once children are removed and separated from their family of origin, leaving them with feelings of guilt, shame and anger. The trauma caused by this major upheaval can lead to attachment issues in their new placement, as well problems moving forward in every domain of life (Simms et al., 2000).

Because foster children have had poorer home environment experiences with their biological parents as well as the disruption from moving from placement to placement once in foster care, children are more likely to have such mental health challenges like PTSD, anxiety and depression (Bederian-Gardner et al., 2018). These occurrences in early life can lead to problems that can last a lifetime (Kerker et al., 2006).

Children are not just being moved away from their families to new homes but also being moved to new school settings impacting their social relationships which can lead to further mental hardships and adjustment difficulties (Hango, 2006). The moving from home and school placements plays a role in attachment styles and children learn quickly to guard against attaching to others for fear of being uprooted (Leonard, Stiles & Gudino, 2016).

Bowlby’s attachment theory posits that children learn from their home life and examples laid out for them how to form lasting relationships (Bowlby, 1988). If children
do not form these relational bonds during their formative years, they can have a difficult time trusting others in the future. Attachment styles are linked to mental health and fortitude. When children are removed from their family of origin and placed in out-of-home care, their relationships can be disrupted which can lead to mental health issues. These issues may go undetected by the children’s new caregivers. When these children eventually age out of foster care, they may have unmet mental health needs that are not being addressed. Many children can benefit from extra time in foster care to deal with any remaining mental health issues (Kerker et al., 2006).

**Substance use**

The arrival of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increased Adoptions Act put into motion additional programs to facilitate transition planning to help aid foster youth in eventual emancipation. The programs themselves address some very necessary topics but were not dealing with the topic of substance use which is a problem to so many people in this population (Greeno, Lee, Tuten, & Harburger, 2018). Research shows that these youth are at a higher risk than their non-foster peers for substance use and other types of maladaptive behavior (Maliszewski & Brown, 2014). Literature has also revealed that youth who identify as a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) community have a higher risk for substance use than those who do not identify as LGBTQ (Greeno et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that foster youth compared to non-foster youth have experimented and used marijuana at a much higher rate to self-regulate feelings of alienation and sadness and also to help in socializing with friends who smoke marijuana (Maliszewski et al., 2014). It was found that adolescents from the child welfare system
were also more likely to use cocaine and methamphetamines (Greeno et al., 2018). These behaviors involving substance use acted upon by this population puts them at greater risk of homelessness, victimization and potential mental health concerns.

Victimization

In addition to substance use, foster youth are also in danger of dating violence occurring in their relationships as well as taking sexual risks, which can jeopardize their ability to lead a healthy, independent life (Maliszewski et al., 2014).

Learned roles of attachment as well as exposure to family violence are contributing factors to repeated violent episodes (Jonson-Reid, Scott, McMillen, & Edmond, 2007). More research is required to gain insight into the effects of early violence on foster youth.

Foster youth are at a high risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. This topic is being surveyed so that programs and policies can be targeting the risk factors to help in preventative action (Latzman, Gibbs, Feinberg, Kluckman, & Aboul-Hosn, 2019).

Human trafficking of minors is becoming more prevalent and is defined as exploiting minors and forcing them into sex work or any type of labor (Latzman et al., 2019).

Human trafficking victims are diverse and can come from any socioeconomic background, however statistics show that there are an ever growing number of victims who have been involved in the foster system. Research shows that many foster youth become vulnerable to human traffickers after they run away from their home or current placement. Foster parents are now required by law to report when their foster youth is missing because of the great risk of that youth becoming involved with human
trafficking. Studies have found that children tend to run away between the ages of 14-16, and that there is as an increased likelihood of running away among lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals (Latzman et al., 2019).

**Education**

Most youth have some level of difficulty adjusting to college life, but those who have aged out of the foster care system frequently have additional challenges. Many of these youth have endured more personal and academic struggles that their peer. They may have been subjected to abuse or neglect and have often been raised in chaotic environments. Many of these young adults have had trouble keeping on track with school as they have had multiple out-of-home placements that do not offer them a sense of continuity in their education or their sense of social and community support.

Each time these students move, their studies are disrupted and they have to try to adjust to their new surroundings and catch up with their new curriculum. This often leads to students missing classes, having gaps in learning and not having access to school records and transcripts. These youth often receive less support from family members than other college students do (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2011). Youth who have grown up in foster care also frequently lack the number of positive role models, mentors and peer support networks that can help young adults to develop the resilience that they need in order to be successful in meeting the demands of college life (Kirk & Day, 2011).

Insufficiencies in familial support and social stability growing up can cause those who are involved in the foster care system to face academic as well as social challenges. They may lag behind their peers in terms of their academic achievement and
may lack the degree of resilience necessary to overcome the rigors and challenges inherent in college life.

Individuals who have grown up in the foster care system already tend to have a difficult time obtaining financial stability, so it is especially important for this vulnerable population to have access to programs and services that can help them to succeed in college. Programs which extend the age of foster care support and include access to aid in the areas of college planning, preparation and successful completion can be helpful in assisting those aging out of foster care to become self-sufficient adults (Kinarsky, 2017).

A college education can seem unattainable for many who have spent time in the foster care system. Some of the factors that can contribute to these challenges include housing instability, poverty, gaps in education and lack of academic preparation. Former foster youth need help with these domains so that they are prepared for the stresses and educational demands that college can present.

Many foster youth are first-time college students or have lived in several care settings, so they did not have consistent long-term planning and consultation regarding their educational goals. Due to these reasons, students are often not prepared with the training and college preparatory classes that would help them to succeed at a university. These youth also need help navigating the admissions process, financial aid and campus life. When students are allowed to stay in foster care until age 21, they are more likely to be able to attain the knowledge that they need and to build the relationships that are crucial to help them to get through the logistics of early college life. These students are then more able to focus their energy on the tasks that are necessary for them to succeed in their classes and to reach their educational goals (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010).
Another important element of education is the choice of major. Research has shown that a person’s lifetime gain, based on 40 years of working, can shift dramatically with the addition of a college degree. The size of this earning gap is variable depending on the subject of the degree. While an educator with a high school diploma may only expect a gain in lifetime earnings of $45,000 after completion of a bachelor’s degree in education, a person who obtains a bachelor’s degree in science, technology, engineering or mathematics could expect to earn well over one million dollars ($1,173,000) more than their peers who only acquire a high school diploma (Kim, Tamborini, & Sakamoto, 2015). Given the importance of the decision between courses of study, aiding foster youth in making informed decisions regarding their education can alter the course of their financial future.

**Housing**

Young adults have historically relied on support from parents and extended family during their transition to adult independence. In recent years, youth have been taking longer to achieve independence due to the increasing costs of housing and education as well as the high rates of unemployment for those entering the workforce. During this time, it is not uncommon for young people to intermittently live with their parents or extended family while they complete their education and find suitable employment. Foster youth who are aging out of care often do not have the safety net of family to fall back on during this time of instability. Instead, these youth often end up homeless (Shat et al., 2017).

In addition to the struggles for independence that most youth face, foster youth can have additional challenges in their transition to adulthood. There are several risk
factors that can contribute to homelessness and housing instability when young adults age out of foster care. Those who have suffered physical abuse from caregivers, who have run away from any of their placements or who are living in a group care setting at the time that they age out of care are more likely than other foster youth to become homeless at the time of their emancipation. One factor that has been found to have a preventive effect against homelessness at the time of emancipation is a strong connection with a family member or trusted primary caregiver on whom the foster youth can depend (Shah et al., 2017).

**Employment**

Foster youth who age out of care have more challenges than their non-foster peers at finding and maintaining gainful employment. Many of these youth have had an unstable upbringing and have not developed the mental and emotional skills that are needed to succeed in the workforce. Some of these skills can be learned. Research has shown that providing life skills training to youth who are transitioning from foster care can lead to better outcomes in education and employment (Pokempner, Rodriguez, & Bussiere, 2009). It has also been shown that programs which include job training had a positive effect on those who participate (Woodgate, Morakinyo, & Martin, 2017).

These programs have been shown to be more helpful to those who are able to take advantage of them for longer periods of time, so they are most beneficial to individuals who are able to extend their time in foster care. Almost half of the participants in one study (45%) succeeded in making at least one positive life change after completing the program. These changes included completing a high school diploma or General
Education Development (GED), enrolling in college courses or securing employment (Barnow et al., 2015).
Discussion

Overview of findings

The general themes explored during this literature review were predominately centered around housing, employment and education rates, because the research was readily available. Results for housing, education and employment all concluded that if an individual had one person on whom they could rely, they would actually fare better than their counterparts who did not have a close, trusting relationship. In addition, those who remained in contact with biological family members, regardless of the closeness of that relationship, would experience less problems than they would have if they lacked that familial contact. Most findings pointed to unhealthy attachment styles as being a risk factor which can lead to increased substance use, victimization, whether in dating violence or in human trafficking, as well as mental health challenges.

Limitations

A recurring theme within the literature was that there needed to be more longitudinal studies. When analyzing programs and policies, they really need to be studied over a longer period of time. For these studies to be more helpful, participants should be surveyed at several different times throughout their lives, including many years after they exit out of the foster care system.

Future research

More research is necessary to determine which of the programs currently available are helpful to youth transitioning out of foster care and how they can be improved. Also, the literature indicated that many individuals were not prepared to transition out of care but were not aware of the types of help that were available to them
or how to access that help. More information is necessary to determine what programs are available and to make these programs more easily accessible to those who need them. In addition, there are a limited number of studies that discuss how these programs can be more inclusive to members of minority groups, including those in the LGBTQ community.

**Conclusion**

In the past decade there have been a number of significant changes in the way that foster youth experience the transition into adulthood. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 offered states the ability to extend the length of time that individuals can stay in foster care. The additional services made available due to funding from this bill are supplementing existing supports that are necessary to help these vulnerable individuals to make the successful transition into adulthood. More research is needed to determine how to improve these programs.
References


Appendix

ADDENDUM – Extended Foster Care in the United States: A Review of the Literature

Extended Foster Care in the United States: A Review of the Literature is a joint graduate project between Diana Dickinson and Terry Woodmansee. This document will explain the division of responsibilities between the two parties. Any additional information can be included in a separate document attached to this Addendum page.

Diana Dickinson #1 is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Read and analyzed data regarding how the extension of foster care affects the educational outcomes of foster youth
- Explored how extended foster care programs can affect housing stability to foster youth
- Examined and reviewed the literature regarding programs which are designed to offer training and employment assistance to foster youth

Terry Woodmansee #2 is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Read and analyzed articles regarding mental health outcomes for those in extended foster care
- Searched substance use findings regarding foster youth to examine the effectiveness of various programs on lowering the rate of substance use among youth in foster care
- Analyzed and reviewed the statistics of victimization rates on foster youth for preventative action

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:

- Researched and sorted through articles related to the extension of foster care services to youth age 18-21 in the United States
- Combed through the literature and determined which issues would be studied in greater detail in the paper
- Chose the literature that most closely related to the subjects of our study
- Analyzed research regarding current programs and determined how these programs are affecting youth who are exiting foster care
- Gathered and recorded all applicable references and ensured that all documentation met APA standards
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