

As foster care teens enter adulthood, obstacles mount, report finds

By **Joe Heim**

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Teenagers transitioning from foster care to adulthood face obstacles that leave them trailing their peers in education, employment, housing and early parenthood, according to a report that for the first time gathers foster care data from all 50 states.

“Fostering Youth Transitions,” a 219-page report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, points to growing gaps in educational achievement and financial security for youths moving from foster care to living on their own. It also highlights significant differences in how foster care affects youths from different racial and ethnic groups, and how the absence of structured guidance once they reach 18 affects their ability to succeed independently.

“Young people at 18 or 21 are at this point of falling off a cliff because they don’t have the support or services they need,” said Leslie Gross, director of the Casey Foundation’s Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. “They also don’t have the folks they can rely on to help them make difficult decisions in their life and get them on the path to success.”

The foster care population in the United States has risen every year for the past five years, from 397,000 at the end of 2012 to 443,000 last year, according to an annual federal government report by the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System. Of that population, more than 171,000 are 14 or older. That cohort has been “virtually invisible,” said Gross, who hopes the study sheds light on the difficulties faced by young people entering adulthood without the emotional and financial safety net that families can provide.

Youth of color are particularly vulnerable and are more likely to face obstacles when transitioning out of foster care.

According to the report, “By age 21, young people who experienced foster care reported significantly lower rates of high school completion and employment than all young people in the general population.” The rates are even worse for black youth who have been in foster care: “In over a third of states,” the report states, “less than half of young African Americans have earned their high school diploma or GED by age 21, and nationally less than half are employed by age 21.”

African American youth are much more likely to be in foster care. In California, African Americans constitute 6 percent of the population, but 23 percent of youths in foster care. In Illinois, they represent 17 percent of the state population, but 53 percent of those in foster care. The disproportionate representation means African American youth are more likely to be subjected to the pitfalls of a foster care system that doesn’t adequately prepare youth for independent living.

“The biggest message of this report is around equity,” Gross said. “When you look at that data, it’s really troubling, so we have to ask the questions of why and change the narrative.”

The report — based on monitoring data collected by the federal government’s Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, National Youth in Transition Database and American Community Survey — calls for extension of care so that foster care youth can continue receiving education, financial assistance and access to guidance programs after they turn 18. Extending foster care to 21 helps provide young people with additional resources and manage the typical problems they face as they approach independent living.

“Only about one-quarter of 18-year-olds remain in foster care until their 19th birthdays,” the report states. “This is partly the result of states maintaining policies that do not allow or encourage young people to extend their time in foster care.”

The absence of such assistance can also lead to homelessness. According to the data, 30 percent of youth who transitioned from foster care to independent living reported having experienced being homeless. And half of young people who had been in foster care start living on their own, without the support of a family.

The study's authors hope the data will lead to changes in local, state and federal policies to direct more programs and funding for youth as they move from foster care to independent living.

“The bottom line is that there is room in every state for significant improvement,” Gross said. “We have a long way to go.”

Joe Heim

Joe Heim joined The Washington Post in 1999. He is a staff writer for the Metro section. He also writes Just Asking, a weekly Q&A column in the Sunday magazine.



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