



## COFCCA SPOTLIGHT ON...

### Chapin Hall Identifies Four Distinct Subgroups of Former Foster Care Youth

**An Issue Brief by Chapin Hall<sup>1</sup> identified four distinct subgroups of former foster youth during young adulthood: accelerated adults, struggling parents, emerging adults, and troubled and troubling. The significant differences among these four groups suggest that better targeted policy and practices are needed to support young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood.**

Policy development and program design is often based on an assumption that a particular population (e.g. youth in foster care between ages 16 and 21) share common traits. The analysis by Chapin Hall identifies four distinctly different subgroups of youth who are transitioning from foster care, suggesting that practices and policies need to be better targeted.. These youth have significant needs in the areas of education, employment, parenting, health and behavior that requires collaboration and accountability beyond just the child welfare system.

**Methods** - The analysis uses information provided by young people participating in the Midwest study.<sup>1</sup> The study has followed 732 young adults from three Midwestern states as they aged out of foster care. Participants were interviewed for the first time at age 17 or 18, again at age 21, and then for a third time at age 23 or 24 (when there was no missing data on key variables).

The authors used an advanced statistical technique appropriately suited to the analysis at hand: a person-oriented approach as compared to a variable-oriented approach to analyzing data. It assumes that “development cannot be understood by examining single factors in isolation from their relationships with other interacting factors.”<sup>ii</sup> This approach explores patterns across multiple characteristics and identifies distinct subgroups within the total population based upon these patterns. (For more information, see endnotes <sup>iii</sup> <sup>iv</sup>.)

**Results** – The analysis yielded four distinct subgroups:

1) *Accelerated Adults* (36%) - called such because they are “most likely to have successfully made key transitions during early adulthood.” They are “most likely to be living on their own in a fairly stable situation, have a high school diploma...most likely to have a college degree...most likely to be currently employed.”

2) *Struggling Parents* (25%) – called such because their “experience appears to be dominated by their parenting, often under very difficult circumstances.” Almost three quarters are female, more likely to be African American, and almost all have resident children, most likely to be married or cohabitating. These individuals are “least likely to have finished high school or to have any college, and least likely to be currently enrolled in school, most likely to be

receiving need based government benefits, only ¼ is currently employed, report the lowest levels of social support among the groups without a high level of institutionalization.”

3) *Emerging Adults* (21%) – called such because they fit the pattern of development that is dominant in society where emerging adulthood allows “young people a prolonged period of independent role exploration...delaying some transition markers (e.g. living on their own, finishing school, having children) while generally avoiding hardship.”<sup>v</sup> “...over half...is male. All are living with friends, relatives...the vast majority have finished high school and have the second highest rate of having at least some college...second highest rate of employment...least likely to have children...lowest rate of criminal conviction...least likely to have ever been married.”

4) *Troubled and Troubling* (18%) – called such “because they exhibit a wide range of psychosocial problems and pose challenges to the broader community.” This group is predominantly male, “...most likely to be currently incarcerated, otherwise institutionalized, ...two fifths have not finished high school...least likely to be currently employed...nearly half have children, none are living with their children. Over four fifths report a criminal conviction since age 18, a rate over five times that of any other group...least likely to have felt prepared to be on their own at exit from care, most likely to report mental health and/or substance abuse problems, and most likely to have been homeless...This group also reports the lowest level of social support and highest rate of victimization...”

**Conclusions** – There are significant differences among these four groups. Policies and practices intended to support young people transitioning from foster care must be better targeted given these differences.

Youth in the *Accelerated Adults* group, the largest

group, are doing reasonably well. While they have been required to grow up quickly, they are negotiating the transition to adulthood largely effectively. They still suffer economically which suggests that concrete financial supports for education and childcare will be needed.

“The size of the *Struggling Parents* group and the magnitude of need across many dimensions call for serious attention to the needs of current and former foster youth who are parents. Indeed, 51% of the young women in the Midwest study are living with at least one child by age 21 and 62% are doing so by age 23 or 24.” The Fostering Connections Act makes no mention of parenting foster youth. In addition, while the law allows youth to remain in care until they turn 21, given their responsibilities as parents they will have a very difficult time meeting the educational and/or employment requirements.

The provisions of the Fostering Connections Act seem best suited to the *Emerging Adults* group in that remaining in care till age 21 provides them additional time to continue to develop. However, because this group tends to be connected to family and friends, policies will need to be flexible in providing support. Child welfare agencies need “to understand that, in many cases, they are actually co-parenting with a young person’s family of origin.”<sup>vi</sup>

The *Troubled and Troubling*, one-fifth of the group of youth transitioning from care, will likely need significant supports. To manage the challenges they carry with them from foster care, this group of individuals may need aid over a period of years after leaving care. Two implications here, and the first is obvious, the foster care system must be held accountable to achieve “greater success at addressing mental and behavioral health problems of adolescents in foster care.” Second, the child welfare system must “be able to collaborate with and rely on other public institutions in carrying out its new mission of continuing to parent foster youth into young adulthood.

These young people have significant needs in the areas of education, employment, parenting, health, and behavior.”

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Endnotes:

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- <sup>i</sup> Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Lee, J. S., & Raap, M. (2010) *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago
- <sup>ii</sup> Magnusson, D. (1995) Individual Development: A holistic, integrated model. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder, Jr., & K. Luscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp. 19-60) Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association
- <sup>iii</sup> Magnusson, D. (1998) The logic and implications of a person-oriented approach. In R. B. Cairns, L. R. Bergman, & J. Kagan (Eds.), *Methods and models for studying the individual* (pp. 33-63) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- <sup>iv</sup> Goodman, L. A. (1974). Exploratory latent structure analysis using both identifiable and unidentifiable models. *Biometrika*, 61, 215-231
- <sup>v</sup> Arnett, J. J. (2000) Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5). 469-80
- <sup>vi</sup> Courtney, M. E. (2009) The difficult transition to adulthood for foster youth in the US: Implications for the state as corporate parent. *Social Policy Report*, 23(1), 3-18.

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