YOUTH EMANCIPATING FROM FOSTER CARE IN CALIFORNIA: FINDINGS USING LINKED ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Barbara Needell, Principal Investigator
Stephanie Cuccaro-Alamin
Alan Brookhart
William Jackman
Aron Shlonsky

Center for Social Services Research
University of California at Berkeley

May 2002
It has been estimated that nearly 20,000 U.S. children emancipate from foster care each year (USDHHS, 1999). Previous research has indicated that these youth often face serious challenges as they enter the adult world. In December, 1999, then President Clinton signed into law the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, (P.L. 106-109), which includes provisions to assist youth leaving foster care by offering better educational opportunities, access to health care, training, housing assistance, and other services (USDHHS, 1999).

Foster care data had previously been reconfigured into longitudinal format at the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) as part of the California Children’s Services Archive. 1 Available social security numbers (SSNs) for emancipating youth were provided to seven state agencies who may have served these youth, data were linked by the agencies, and linked data were then provided to CSSR staff. Linkage to each of these administrative datasets is an indicator of an outcome. For example, emancipating youth whose records were linked to the state prison database were considered to have entered prison; those for whom there was no linkage were considered not to have entered prison. For some data, (MEDS, Mental Health, Vital Statistics), individual level data with identifiers were provided, allowing for analysis at the child specific level. Individual level data were also provided regarding Community College enrollment, but without identifiers and with some data suppressed due to small sample sizes. California Youth Authority data was also provided without identifiers. State prison and GED data were provided in the aggregate. All analyses were run separately for emancipating child welfare (ECW) and emancipating probation (EPR) youth. In many cases, the sample of female EPR youth was too small for meaningful interpretation.

Most of the existing research on emancipation from foster care uses interviews with former foster youth. Only recently have administrative data been used as a tool to inform this issue. The study reported here uses a sample of 12,306 youth who emancipated 2 from foster care in California between the years of 1992 and 1997.

In summary:

1. A substantial number of California youth are growing up in child welfare supervised foster care, and many of these youth are having multiple placements while in care.

2. Most youth in foster care receive some kind of mental health services. The most common diagnosis for youth emancipating from the child welfare system was a mood disorder, while the most common diagnosis for youth emancipating from the probation system was a behavior disorder. Youth placed with kin are less likely to receive mental health services than those in other placement types, and youth in group homes are by far the most likely to receive mental health services.

---

1 Data was derived from the Foster Care Information system (FCIS) database, supplied to CSSR through an interagency agreement with the California Department of Social Services.

2 Children who exited the foster care system with a reason for termination code of “Emancipation or Age of Majority”, or who exited at age 19 or older with no termination reason given.
3. A substantial minority of young women is becoming pregnant in child welfare services supervised foster care, or shortly after emancipation. However, the birth rate for 18 - 19 year old females who emancipate from the child welfare system does not appear to be greater than the rate for other 18 - 19 year old females.

4. Many emancipating females (apparently the majority of those who become mothers) receive “welfare” after emancipation. They are about 4 times as likely to receive “welfare” as other young females in the population.

5. Although many youth make connections with the state’s community college system, and many have laudable educational goals, few progress through the system.

7. A small but disturbing proportion of males enter the state prison system after they leave the child welfare system, and many males who emancipate from the probation foster care system later enter the state prison system.

The clearest consistent finding was that youth emancipating from the child welfare system who have had 5 or more placements were those who generally experienced the worst outcomes, suggesting both the need for targeted services to youth with multiple placements, and continued effort to improve placement stability for youth in care. Further investigation is necessary to better understand the association between multiple placements and the receipt of mental health services. Multiple placements may be the cause and/or the effect of child specific problems.

Research that utilizes administrative data does have its limitations, and this study in particular has weaknesses that must be mentioned. The foster care data, drawn from California’s now defunct Foster Care Information System, may contain errors, and there is missing data, particularly regarding type of placement. The other data sources may also contain errors or be incomplete. Only 93 percent of the youth in the sample had valid SSNs, and although it does appear that this subsample is not particularly biased (see Tables 1 and 2), the use of more thorough probabilistic matching techniques may have improved the quality of the linkages. Therefore, linkages probably underestimate the number of true matches. Using only SSNs particularly hampered the linkage to Vital Statistics data, as SSNs in the Vital Statistics database were only available from 1996 onwards. Current confidentiality agreements and privacy concerns did not allow for individual level data for some of the linkages and suppression of cells and or aggregation of data severely limited our ability to conduct certain analyses. GED and state prison data were only provided in the aggregate, and cells were suppressed due to small sample size in the community college data.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution to the research on youth who emancipate from foster care. Measurements that previously were poorly estimated

---

3 CSSR was not involved in the design of this study
4 CSSR now uses the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) to continue the longitudinal foster care database
through anecdote or non-representative samples have been produced in recent years for the entire population of California’s emancipating youth. This study marks the first time these data have been integrated and analyzed in California, representing an important initial step in measuring these crucial outcomes for youth who emancipate from out of home care.
REFERENCES


