



# Older Youth with Disabilities in Foster Care

The prevalence and experience of older youth with disabilities in foster care in Minnesota: An analysis of state administrative data.

Center for Advanced Studies  
in **Child Welfare**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

## What is the Field of Child Welfare?

The child welfare field includes human services in the areas of child protection, foster care, and adoption. This work is carried out in a state supervised, county administered system by government as well as non-profit agencies, and is supported by research and evaluation from government, academic institutions and non-profit organizations. The collective goal of child welfare is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families.

## Child Welfare and Youth With Disabilities

This brief highlights the experiences of older youth with disabilities in Minnesota and their intersection with the child welfare system. The following findings and recommendations are based on the dissertation research<sup>1</sup> of Katharine Hill, PhD, Assistant Professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work and Consulting Researcher with the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare.

### Disabilities and Maltreatment\*

Over the past twenty years, studies have found that children and youth with disabilities experience a higher rate of maltreatment than children and youth without disabilities (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Sullivan & Knutsen, 1998, 2000; Verdugo & Bermejo, 1995; Westcott & Jones, 1999), and are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system (Crosse, Kaye, & Ratnofsky, 1992; Lightfoot, Hill, & LaLiberte, 2011; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000).

Sullivan and Knutsen (2000) found that youth with disabilities are 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated or abused, while Crosse and colleagues (1992) found that there was a 1.7 times greater incidence of maltreatment among children with disabilities.

Analysis of Minnesota's state administrative data indicates that children of all ages with a disability diagnosis were 1.87 times more likely to be placed in out of home care than their peers without a disability, but also with a substantiated maltreatment report. This number jumped to 2.16 times more likely for school-aged children with a disability with a substantiated maltreatment report (Lightfoot, Hill, & Laliberte, 2011).

## Disabilities, Foster Care, and Child Welfare

Approximately 29,000 young people age out of the foster care system in the United States every year<sup>2</sup> and, although research has not been extensive, it is likely that a high proportion of them have a disability diagnosis. In Minnesota, approximately 10% of the total population of youth in care age out of the foster care system each year<sup>3</sup>. Youth emancipating from foster care and youth aging out of special education are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, more likely to struggle with poverty and homelessness, and less likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education or training than their same-aged peers<sup>4</sup>.

## Demographic Differences between Youth With and Without Disabilities

An examination of the demographic characteristics of Minnesota youth with disabilities in foster care indicates that they are different than their peers without disabilities in the areas of gender and racial/ethnic identity. For this group, females were 40% as likely to have a disability diagnosis as males and Caucasian youth were 70% as likely to have a disability diagnosis as their peers of color. This means male youth of color in out of home placements are more likely to be identified as having a disability.

Further, older Minnesota youth in foster care have a different prevalence of disability diagnoses than youth in state special education programs. For example, of the youth with disabilities in foster care, 55% had an identification of emotional disturbance as their primary disability. Comparatively, the federal special education data indicates that only 7.9% of youth in special education in the state have the same diagnosis (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Conversely, while 46.4% of youth in special education in the state are identified as having a learning disability, only 13.6% of the youth in foster care have that same identification as their primary disability.

Although there has been an increased focus in recent years on improving transition outcomes for youth who are aging out of foster care, the needs and experience of those youth who have a disability and are in foster care are much less well documented and understood.

While these findings are exploratory, they do indicate that there are significant differences among youth with disabilities and youth without disabilities in Minnesota's foster care system. Youth with disabilities differ demographically, as well as in terms of their experiences in both child welfare and education. Thus, it is critical that policymakers, service providers, and other stakeholders begin to pay increased attention to the specific needs of this population.

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## Prevalence and Implications of Youth with Disabilities in Foster Care

**Policy Problem:** Findings from this study indicate that youth with disabilities have a higher average number of out-of-home placements and are less likely to have a concurrent plan for their permanency outcomes than their non-disabled peers. However, much research and evaluation of child protective services, out-of-home-placements, and outcomes for former foster youth have all purposefully excluded many youth with disabilities from their samples<sup>5</sup>. The findings reported in this brief indicate that youth with disabilities are, in fact, the majority of older youth in care, and clearly make up a substantial proportion of all children and youth in the child welfare system.

**Policy Solution:** Researchers and policymakers must stop excluding young people with disability diagnoses from their studies in order to gain a valid picture of child welfare services and outcomes.

Further, placement stability is an area of concern for all youth in foster care; this research indicates that youth with disabilities face challenges in this area which are specific to their disability status. Thus, increasing support for foster parents, group homes, and biological families of children with disabilities, including both formal and informal supports, is a critical need that could be addressed through more inclusive research practices and policymaking.

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## Youth With Disabilities: Accessing Resources

**Policy Issue:** Youth with disabilities are less likely to participate in Minnesota's Independent Living Program for foster youth, entitled Support for Emancipation and Living Functionally program, or SELF program. Youth with disabilities are only 80% as likely to access SELF services than youth without disabilities. This program primarily provides services through counties in the areas of independent living skills trainings; educational supports and connections, such as GEDs; assistance with gathering vital documents, such as birth certificates or driver's licenses; and helping youth develop Independent Living Plans<sup>6</sup>.

**Policy Solution:** The reasons why young people with disabilities in foster care are not accessing the SELF program at the same rates as their peers without disabilities are not addressed in this research; however, there is a need to understand how access to this program is managed.

Which youth are referred? How are services delivered? Are accommodations and supports available so that SELF services are accessible to all youth in foster care? Policymakers and researchers must work to understand these dynamics and develop a plan to increase enrollment in the SELF program.

Additionally, given the high prevalence of children and youth with disabilities in the child welfare system, child welfare workers and managers should receive mandatory training and support in order to increase their knowledge and skills about disabilities, disability services, and resources in their communities for people with disabilities<sup>7</sup>.

## Integrating Services Across Systems

**Policy Issue:** The sum of this research denotes a need for integrated services across systems in order to meet the needs of youth with disabilities in the foster care system, as this population requires resources and support from state, private, and non-profit agencies and professionals.

**Policy Solution:** Rather than looking to public agencies to expand their service menus in a time of shrinking resources, it is logical to focus on building connections between and among both public and private agencies and schools, in order to address the complex needs of youth with disabilities as they reach adulthood, and to capitalize on the expertise of each service area in order to best support these young people.

## Building the Evidence Base

CASCW urges the continuation and expansion of programs aimed at improving outcomes for children of color in the Child Welfare System along with the inclusion of rigorous evaluation components enhancing accountability, identifying best practices and allowing policy makers and practitioners to isolate areas for improvement.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Hill, K. (2010). The transition of youth with disabilities from the child welfare system: An analysis of state administrative data. [Doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from <http://conservancy.umn.edu>.
- <sup>2</sup> USDHS, 2010
- <sup>3</sup> MN DHS, 2010
- <sup>4</sup> Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Johnson, Emmanuel, Stodden, Luecking, & Mack 2002; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005
- <sup>5</sup> See for example: Courtney & Dworsky, 2005 and Laflin, 2008
- <sup>6</sup> Laflin, 2008
- <sup>7</sup> Lightfoot & LaLiberte, 2006

## For more in-depth information on this topic

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