

Improving Outcomes for the Children of the State:  
Lessons from Research on Foster Youths'  
Transitions to Adulthood

10th Annual ITV/VPC Conference: Adolescents Aging out  
of Foster Care

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My Purpose Today

- Describe the U.S. policy context regarding the transition to adulthood for foster youth
- Briefly describe youth in care on the verge of transition
- Describe the Midwest Study
- Describe outcomes at age 21 for youth in the study and outcome trends over time
- Present findings suggestive of the benefits of allowing youth to remain in care past age 18
- Discuss the relevance of this research to the new Fostering Connections to Success Act

U.S. Demographic, Developmental and Policy Context

- The transition to adulthood in the U.S. is taking longer
  - Markers of the transition are happening later; half of young people between 18-24 live with a parent
  - \$38k in direct support between 18-34
- Developmental psychologists describe a new period of “emerging adulthood”
- Yet, U.S. policy provides little support for young adults

U.S. Policy on Foster Youth in Transition

- Limited research from the 1970s to the 1990s show poor outcomes for foster youth in transition
- Provider advocates in the 1980s and providers and youth advocates in the 1990s push for change
- 1986 **Independent** Living Initiative
- 1999 Foster Care **Independence** Act
- Legislation to extend foster care through age 21 was signed into law last month (**Fostering Connections** to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act)!

Midwest Study Design and Sample

- Largest prospective study of foster youth making the transition to adulthood since the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999
- Collaboration between state child welfare agencies and the research team
- Foster youth in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois who:
  - Were still in care at age 17
  - Had entered care before their 16th birthday
  - Had been placed in care because they were abused, neglected or dependent
  - Not originally placed because of delinquency
- Data from in-person interviews (structured and in-depth qualitative) and government program administrative data

Study Design and Sample (continued)

Wave	Year	Number Interviewed	Response Rate	Age at interview
1	'02 – '03	732	96%	17 – 18
2	'04	603	82%	19
3	'06	591	81%	21
4	'08	?	?	23

## Demographic Characteristics

		Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
N		732	603	591
Gender	Male	48.5	45.9	46.9
	Female	51.5	54.1	53.1
Race	Black	57.0	56.7	55.5
	White	30.9	30.8	32.7
	Other/Multi-racial	12.1	12.4	11.8
Ethnicity	Hispanic origin	8.6	8.3	7.8
State	Illinois	64.8	64.0	61.6
	Wisconsin	26.6	27.0	29.8
	Iowa	8.6	8.0	8.6

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## Selected Baseline (17-18) Characteristics

- Most entered care as adolescents
- Vast majority experienced abuse/neglect prior to care
- About 2/3 in kin or nonkin foster homes with remainder in group care or supervised independent living placements
- Poor educational attainment; high special needs
- High rates of affective and substance use disorders
- High rates of delinquency and justice system involvement
- Poor employment history compared to peers
- Most had favorable views of care, high educational aspirations, and were optimistic about the future
- Strong connections to family of origin

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## Outcomes at Age 21

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## Educational Attainment at Age 21

	Percent	
	Midwest Study	Add Health
No high school diploma/GED	23.0	10.8
High school diploma only	37.6	29.7
GED only	9.7	6.6
One or more years of college but no degree	27.9	43.0
Two-year college degree	1.9	8.1
Four-year college degree	0.0	1.8

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## Employment at Age 21

	Percent	
	Midwest Study	Add Health
Ever held a job	95.1	96.9
Worked since last interview	85.4	
Currently employed	51.5	63.9
Currently employed (non-incarcerated only)	55.5	63.9
Median hours worked per week	40.0	40.0
Median hourly wage	8.00	9.12

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## Economic Hardships During the Past Year

	Percent	
	Midwest Study	Add Health
Not enough \$ to pay rent	26.5	8.6
Not enough \$ to pay utility bill	26.5	10.9
Gas or electricity shut off	8.3	6.1
Phone service disconnected	32.8	19.1
Evicted	8.3	1.4
At least one hardship	49.5	27.5
Mean number of hardships	1.02	0.46

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## Criminal Justice System Involvement

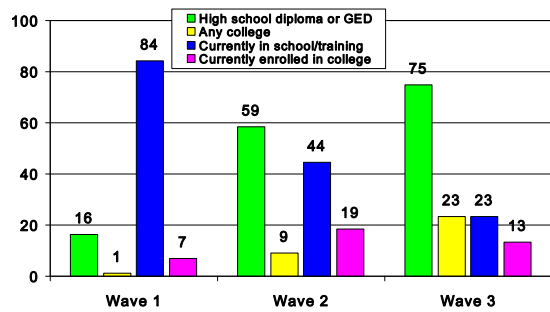
	Percent			
	Males		Females	
	Midwest Study	Add Health	Midwest Study	Add Health
Ever arrested	77.0	20.1	54.0	4.3
Arrested since age 18	55.3	7.5	29.6	.5
Ever convicted	47.9	12.1	22.3	1.3
Convicted since age 18	32.3	10.3	12.2	1.3
Ever incarcerated	69.3	---	40.7	---
Incarcerated since age 18	54.0	---	24.5	---

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## Trends Over Time

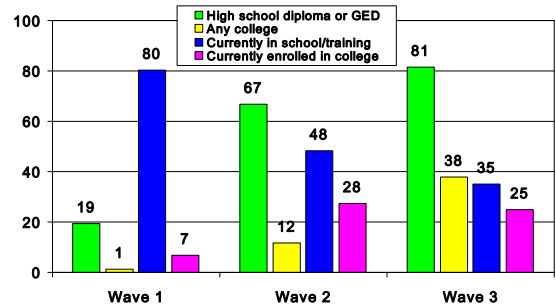
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## Young Men's Educational Attainment



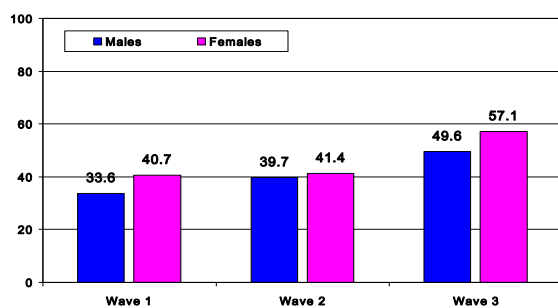
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## Young Women's Educational Attainment



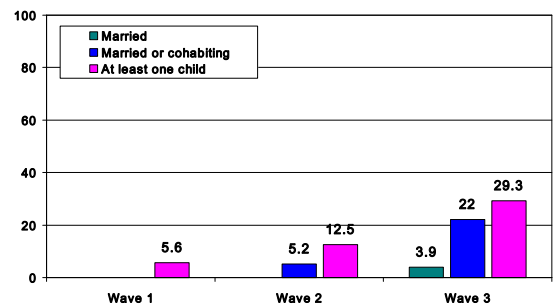
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## Young Men's and Young Women's Employment



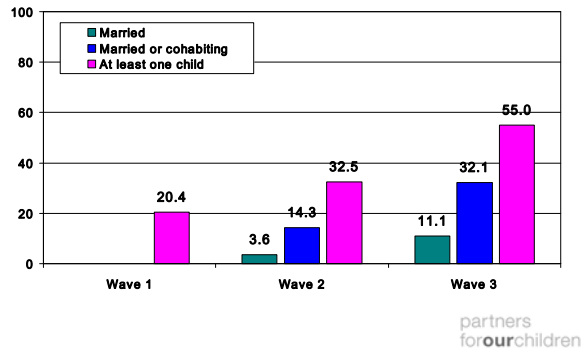
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## Young Men's Family Formation

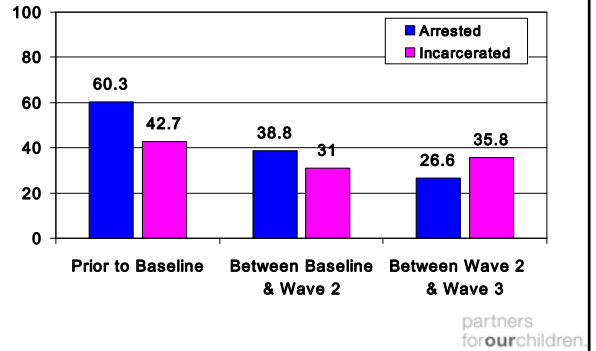


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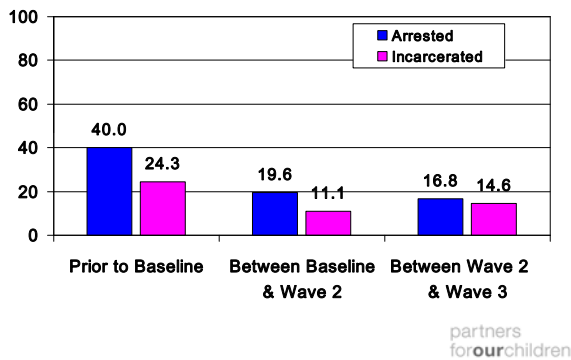
### Young Women's Family Formation



### Young Men's Criminal Justice System Involvement



### Young Women's Criminal Justice System Involvement



### Summary of Outcomes at Age 21

- Outcomes are relatively poor across a variety of important transition domains
- Trends are generally problematic:
  - Declining engagement in education
  - Gradually increasing engagement in the workforce
  - Continue to have children out of wedlock
  - After initial decline, uptick in incarceration between 19-21
- Outcomes vary by gender, with males faring worse
- Overall outcomes hide important between-state differences

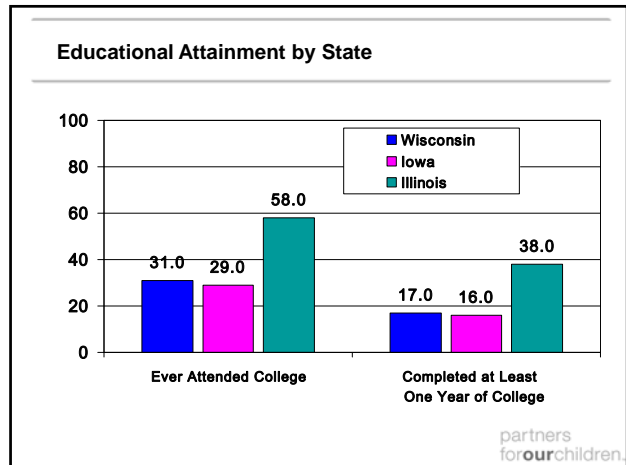
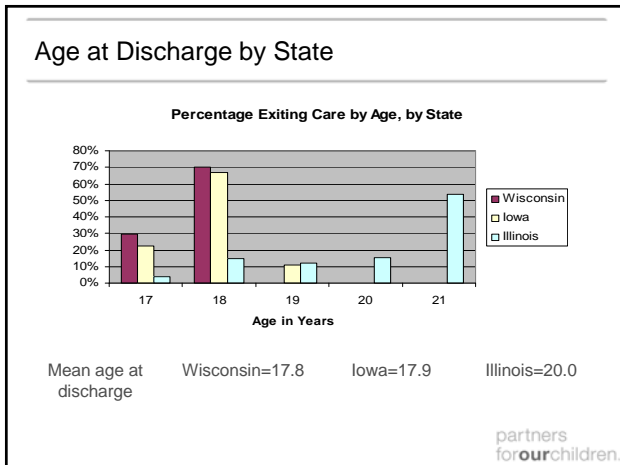
### Potential Benefits of Allowing Foster Youth to Remain in Care Beyond Age 18

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### Natural Experiment

- Ability of foster youth to remain "in care" beyond age 18 varies across states
- Illinois is one of the few jurisdictions where courts can (and routinely do) extend care and supervision until age 21
- Wisconsin and Iowa generally discharge youth before their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday
  - Exception for Iowa foster youth who are on track to graduate from high school
  - Exception for Wisconsin foster youth who are pregnant

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### Effect on Estimated Odds of Post-Secondary Education

	Ever Attended College	Completed at Least One Year of College
IL (vs. WI and IA)	4.08	3.48
Retained	0.64	0.56
Reading level	1.04	1.06
Delinquency score	0.77	0.62
Worked prior to baseline	2.33	2.90
Aspired to graduate from college	2.58	3.68

Being from Illinois as opposed to Iowa/Wisconsin increased the estimated odds of attending college by age 21 by 4 times and the estimated odds of completing at least one year of college by age 21 by 3.5 times

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### Annual Earnings from Employment at Age 21

Mean for total sample (n = 556)	\$6,894
Mean for total sample with earnings (n = 427)	\$8,977
Effect of remaining in care for an additional year on earnings	\$470
Effect of remaining in care for an additional year on earnings controlling for unobserved differences between individuals	\$924

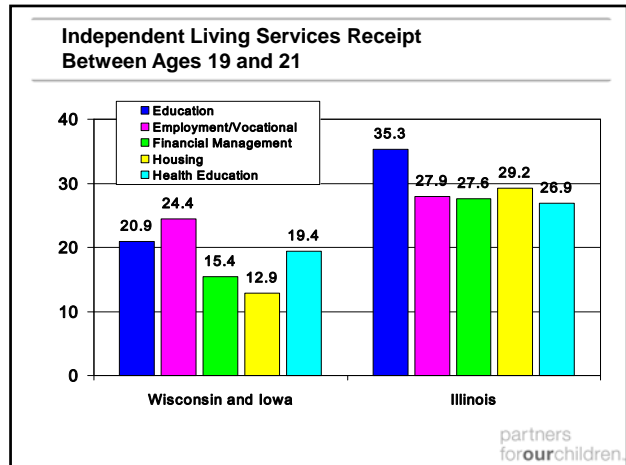
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### Association Between Care Status and the Risk of Pregnancy

	Waves 1 - 2	Waves 1 - 3
Prior pregnancy	2.177***	1.696**
Care status	0.587*	0.766
Wisconsin	0.963	0.885
Iowa	0.644	0.805

Being in care was associated with a 41% reduction in the risk of pregnancy between baseline and age 19  
 Being in care was not associated with a statistically significant reduction in the risk of pregnancy between baseline and age 21

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## Summary of Findings on Extending Care

- Strong evidence that allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21 increases their likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education
- More qualified evidence that allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21 is associated with increased earnings and delayed pregnancy
- Allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21 also increases the likelihood of receiving independent living services after age 19

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## What About “Permanency” for Foster Youth in Transition?

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## Connections with Family of Origin at Age 21

Contact at least once a month	%
Mother	61%
Father	31%
Grandparent(s)	46%
Sibling(s)	78%

Nearly one-quarter were living with a birth parent or other adult relative at the time of the interview

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## Other indicators of adult support...

- 9 percent had been adopted at some point; another 20 percent wished they had been adopted
- 5.6% were living with a former non-relative foster parent at age 21, but more (7.1%) were in jail or prison
- 60% reported having had an adult mentor, with 72% being very or quite close to the mentor...almost 9 in 10 were “informal” mentors

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## Summary/Implications

- The glass is still arguably half empty for foster youth in transition to adulthood
- Risk factors for poor outcomes (e.g., grade retention; delinquency; runaway) suggest that a greater focus on well-being *before youth reach the age of majority* is sorely needed
- Allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21 appears to be a protective factor during the transition
- Ongoing relations with family are the norm rather than the exception for this group; we are really *co-parenting* these young adults
- Non-familial adults do not appear to play nearly as important a role, by age 21, as the family of origin: How can we help create and support positive adult relationships for these young people?

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## A Brave New World: The Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2008

Among its provisions, the law:

- Extends Title IV-E funding (including guardianship and adoption subsidies), at state option, to age 21
- Youth must be 1) completing high school or an equivalency program; 2) enrolled in post-secondary or vocational school; 3) participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment; 4) employed for at least 80 hours per month; or 5) incapable of doing any of these activities due to a medical condition
- Existing IV-E protections remain, including ongoing court oversight of state foster care provision

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## Implications for Corporate Parenting into Adulthood

- UK concept of "corporate parenting": *All* public institutions have a collective responsibility for the care of the children of the state, with the child welfare authority having primary responsibility
- The Fostering Connections to Success Act implies that states now have the option to carry out the corporate parenting role on behalf of young *adults*
- What roles should the child welfare agency play? The courts? Other public institutions? Young people?
- Implementation of the National Youth in Transition Database will create a national natural experiment in corporate parenting of young people
- Ironically, child well-being will finally become a focus of child welfare policy for minors as a result of the new explicit focus on well-being for young adults in care

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