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## **The Difficult Transition to Adulthood for Foster Youth in the US: Implications for the State as Corporate Parent**

Mark E. Courtney  
School of Social Work, University of Washington

### Abstract

Although they make up a relatively small proportion of all children in the U.S. foster care system, foster youth approaching adulthood have over the years attracted considerable attention from policymakers. Three times in the past 25 years the Social Security Act has been amended to try to better support the transition to adulthood for foster youth. The new Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act represents a fundamental shift away from the goal of preparing foster youth to be independent of state assistance by the age of majority towards an active engagement by government in parenting foster youth into adulthood. This policy shift reflects an evolving understanding of normative transitions to adulthood and growing knowledge of the particular challenges faced by foster youth in transition. In this report, I briefly describe the U.S. child welfare system, summarize research on the transition to adulthood for foster youth showing that they generally face a very difficult transition, and examine the evolution of U.S. policy towards foster youth using the concept of “corporate parenting.” I conclude that recent policy developments provide an excellent opportunity to improve transition outcomes for foster youth, but that lingering challenges still exist including: likely state reluctance to expand the parenting role; a poor knowledge base regarding the effectiveness of independent living services; the lack of established and well-evaluated models of coordination between child welfare agencies and other public institutions in supporting foster youth; the complex nature of “permanency” for foster youth in transition; and the fact that the new law still excludes important populations of foster youth. I argue that policy and program development must be accompanied by strategic use of research and evaluation to maximize the opportunity provided by the new policy regime.

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sherrod@srcd.org

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## FROM THE EDITOR

In this issue of the *Social Policy Report*, Mark Courtney, University of Washington, describes the situation of children in foster care as they age out of care and make the transition to adult independent living. As he points out, this is a small but very needy population, and as a result, it has received quite a bit of policy attention. Dr. Courtney mentions, for example, that the Social Security Act has been amended three times to address foster children's transition to adulthood.

This policy attention entails the government taking a role in parenting these young people. Dr. Courtney does an outstanding job of describing the complexities of the government taking on the role of parent. He invokes the British term "corporate parenting" to denote that the government must assume ALL the responsibilities of parents when policy puts the state in the role of parent. Several of our reviewers took exception to this term, but it is engrained in the literature, and I think conveys the unusual nature of the state as parent. Of course the state cannot actually parent, so its job is to find parents.

Because of my interest in the transition to adulthood, this has long been a favorite topic of mine. Anyone who has parented a child through the transition to adulthood knows how much support is needed. And the amount of support needed has increased as the transition to adulthood has been increasingly delayed in the general population. Jeffrey Arnett has coined the term "emerging adulthood" to denote that this transition slowly occurs across up to a decade. Because the traditional events that herald adulthood have been increasingly delayed and separated by time, young adults define their adult independence in terms of psychological qualities such as having their own views instead of events such as being financially independent of one's parents. Of course, youth who age out of foster care do not have the luxury for adulthood to emerge slowly. However, what this research clearly shows is that youth's dependence on their parents as they transition to adulthood has substantially increased.

Despite the already considerable policy attention which this topic has received, several—too many—challenges remain. These are each described admirably by Dr. Courtney in this article. I would add the social changes in the transition to adulthood, described above, to this list. This is an area, as Dr. Courtney describes, where it is essential for policy and research to proceed hand in hand. Brooke and I hope that this issue of SPR contributes to that goal.

Lonnie Sherrod, Ph.D., Editor  
SRCD Executive Director

## The Difficult Transition to Adulthood for Foster Youth in the US: Implications for the State as Corporate Parent

Mark E. Courtney  
School of Social Work,  
University of Washington

Although they make up a relatively small proportion of all children in the U.S. foster care system, foster youth approaching adulthood have over the years attracted considerable attention from policymakers. Three times in the past 25 years the Social Security Act has been amended to try to better support the transition to adulthood for foster youth. The shift over time in federal policy reflects an evolving understanding of normative transitions to adulthood, growing knowledge of the particular challenges faced by foster youth in transition, and changing views of the state's role as corporate parent of foster youth and former foster youth. In this report, I briefly describe the U.S. child welfare system, summarize research on the transition to adulthood for foster youth, and place the findings of this research in the context of knowledge of normative transitions to adulthood, arguing that the outcomes observed for foster youth are cause for concern. I then describe the evolution of U.S. policy towards foster youth making the transition to adulthood using the concept of "corporate parenting." I conclude that recent policy developments provide an excellent opportunity to improve transition outcomes for foster youth, but that lingering challenges still exist and that policy and program development must be accompanied by strategic use of research and evaluation to maximize this opportunity.

### Overview of the U.S. Child Welfare System

According to estimates from the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), 510,000 children lived in out-of-home care in the U.S. on September 30, 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008a). Three-fifths of these children were members of an ethnic or racial minority group, fifty-two percent were male, and their median age was 10.2 years. Almost half (46 percent) of these children lived with non-relative foster parents (traditional family foster care), 24 percent lived in relative or "kinship" foster care, 17 percent lived in group homes or other children's institutions, three percent in a pre-adoptive home, five percent were living at home during a trial home visit, two percent had run away from care but were still the legal responsibility of the child welfare agency, and one percent were living in super-

vised independent living settings (e.g., an apartment that is supervised by the child welfare agency). Children in formal kinship foster care remain in the day-to-day care of their extended families, but the public child welfare agency has authority over these placements under the direction of the juvenile court.

State child welfare programs are operated under the legal framework provided by Titles IV-E and IV-B of the Social Security Act, with Title IV-E providing states with federal reimbursement for a significant part of the costs of foster care for children.<sup>1</sup> Juvenile and family courts supervise the care of children by state and local public child welfare agencies. Children enter foster care when a public child welfare agency, with the review and supervision of the court, determines that they should be removed from their home in order to protect them from abuse, neglect, and/or dependency. Child welfare agencies are required to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent placement of children in out-of-home care; these efforts generally consist of social services provided to the child's family. When the child welfare agency and court deem these efforts unsuccessful and the child enters foster care, the court must approve a "permanency plan" for the child according to provisions provided in federal law. The most common initial plan is for the child to return to the care of parents or other family members. In these cases the court generally requires the child welfare agency to make reasonable efforts to preserve the child's family of origin by providing services intended to help reunite the child with the family. Often, however, children and youth cannot return to the care of their families, leading the child welfare agency and the court to attempt to find another permanent home for the child through adoption or legal guardianship.

The vast majority of children in out-of-home care will exit care to what are considered "permanent" placements. For example, of the estimated 289,000 children who left out-of-home care in the U.S. during FY 2006, 86 percent went to live with family, were adopted, or were placed in the home of a legal guardian (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008a). A few (2 percent) were transferred to another public agency such as a probation or mental health department and a few (2 percent) ran away and were discharged from care.

In spite of state efforts to find permanent homes for children and youth in foster care, some adolescents reach the point where they are "emancipated" to "independent living," usually due to reaching the age of

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1 States are reimbursed for a portion of their foster care maintenance payments (i.e., payments to foster care providers) and allowable administrative costs of the foster care program.

majority or upon graduation from high school.<sup>2</sup> This is often referred to as aging out of the foster care system. In practice, few states allow youth to remain in care much past their eighteenth birthday since until now states have only been reimbursed for foster care maintenance and administration costs for children and youth 18 years old and younger, and in some cases through age 19 if the youth is deemed likely to graduate from high school before reaching their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday (Bussey et al 2000). However, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Public Law 110-351, hereafter referred to as the “Fostering Connections Act”), passed unanimously in both houses of Congress and signed into law by President Bush in October 2008, amends Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to encourage states, beginning in 2011, to allow youth to remain in care past age 18. I discuss the provisions of this new law and its implications at the conclusion of this report.

According to data provided by the states to the federal government, 26,517 youth exited care via discharge to independent living in 2006, though the data do not distinguish the youth who chose to do so when given the opportunity from those involuntarily discharged due to their age (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008a). These statistics also do not accurately account for the number of young people who leave foster care without the permission of the child welfare agency and court as they approach the age of majority. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some youth who are categorized as runaways leave care for this reason, and some young people go to live with members of their family of origin as they approach the age of majority and end up being counted as “reunified” with their family as opposed to having aged out of care.

An important aspect of U.S. child welfare policy is that when a child enters foster care the state--via the courts and child welfare agencies--takes on the role of surrogate parent. While this role is often short-lived, in many cases the state remains the parent for many years. Indeed, in some cases the state remains parent up to the point where young people begin to make the transition to adulthood. For the purposes of this discussion it is useful to consider the concept of “corporate parenting,”

<sup>2</sup> The terms “emancipation” and “discharge to independent living” are often used interchangeably by child welfare services practitioners and should not be interpreted as equivalent to “legally emancipated minor,” which is generally used to describe a person under age 18 who has been deemed legally independent of parental and court control.

which British social welfare scholars and policymakers have come to use in describing the proper role of the state in providing out-of-home care (Bullock et al 2006; Parker, 1980). In broad terms, the principle is simple: As the corporate parent of children in out-of-home care, the public child welfare agency has a legal and moral duty to provide the kind of support that any good parent would provide for their own children. Of course, while governments cannot actually parent, when they assume custody of children they assume responsibility for finding and supporting adults who can carry out the parenting role. Importantly, the British corporate parenting concept also implies that all relevant public institutions (e.g., public welfare, education, public health), and not just the public child welfare system, have responsibility for the state’s children.

Before moving on, it is important to note that relatively few young people who make the transition to adulthood from foster care spent the bulk of their childhood in care. A study of the placement trajectories of youth in care on their sixteenth birthday found that most had entered care since their fifteenth birthday and only ten percent had entered care as preteens (i.e., twelve or younger)

(Wulczyn and Brunner Hislop 2001). Nearly half (47 percent) of these youth were returned to their families at discharge from the child welfare system and more youth experienced “other” exits (21 percent, mainly transfers to other child serving systems such as the juvenile justice system) or ran away from care (19 percent) than were emancipated (12 percent). In short, most older youth in out-of-home care enter care during their adolescence and relatively few remain in care until they officially “age out.”

These facts raise important issues when one examines the young adult outcomes of older youth leaving the foster care system. These youth have generally spent many years in troubled homes prior to intervention by child protection authorities. Thus, the outcomes they experience during the transition to adulthood may largely be a function of the problems that they brought with them to the child welfare system rather than an effect of poor care while in the system. Moreover, because they generally spent many years living with their families before entering care, it should not be surprising to find that most youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care maintain strong connections with their families, complicating the corporate parenting role of the state.

When a child enters foster care the state--via the courts and child welfare agencies--takes on the role of surrogate parent.

## Research on the Transition to Adulthood for Foster Youth

The research review below focuses primarily on studies with samples that had “aged out” of care or who had at least left care in late adolescence. I also sought studies that reported young adult outcomes (i.e., 18-24) as opposed to later adult outcomes, though a few of the retrospective studies included some subjects who were interviewed at an older age. Although some studies compared outcomes for former foster youth to matched samples or national norms, this was rare. Fortunately, McDonald et al (1996), in their review of research on the long-term consequences of foster care, used a variety of sources to compare reported outcomes from some studies to regional and national data sources for the appropriate period. In addition, the more recent studies by Courtney et al (2005; 2007) and Pecora et al (2005) also make some comparisons to broader populations.

Several limitations of this research literature deserve attention. First, most of the studies are quite dated; much of the available research may not accurately depict the characteristics of the population that is aging out of care today and the services and supports available to them. Second, many of the studies employ rather idiosyncratic samples that may not do a good job of describing the experiences of the general population of former foster youth. Third, most of the studies suffer from high rates of sample attrition.

The review provided here summarizes research findings concerning several domains of outcomes experienced by former foster youth during the transition to adulthood: education, physical and mental health, substance abuse, criminal justice system involvement, employment and economic self-sufficiency, housing and homelessness, family formation, and family relations. These outcomes are important indicators of the well-being of foster youth making the transition to adulthood and problems in any one of these domains can make success in another less likely. The review provides sobering evidence of just how difficult the transition to adulthood can be for former foster youth.

*Education.* Human capital is clearly important for success during the transition to adulthood, but studies of former foster youth find poor levels of educational attainment and that the population fairs poorly when compared to its peers. Most studies show them to be less likely to earn a high school diploma or their GED (Blome, 1997; Zimmerman 1982; Festinger 1983;

Frost and Jurich 1983; Jones and Moses 1984; Barth 1990; Cook et al 1991; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Pecora et al 2005). For example, Courtney and Dworsky (2006) found that roughly 58 percent of their sample of former foster youth had a high school degree at age 19 compared to 87 percent of a national comparison group. Not surprisingly, most studies find that former foster youth have low rates of college attendance (Zimmerman 1982; Jones and Moses 1984; Barth 1990; Cook et al 1991; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Pecora et al 2005). For example, Pecora et al (2005) found that participation in post-secondary education and bachelor’s degree completion rates among former foster youth was much lower than among the general population. Courtney and Dworsky (2006) found the young adults in their study to be much less likely than their age peers to be enrolled in post-secondary education of any kind.

### *Physical and Mental Health.*

Former foster youth suffer from more mental health problems than the general population (Robins 1966; Festinger 1983; Jones and Moses 1984; Courtney and Dworsky 2006; McMillen et al 2005; Pecora et al 2005). Support for this conclusion comes from data on their utilization of mental health services and research assessments of their mental health. Courtney and Dworsky (2006) found that 19 year olds making the transition to adulthood from foster care were over twice as likely as their peers to receive psychological or emotional counseling. Moreover, Pecora et al (2005) found that young adults who had been in out-of-home care as adolescents were twice as likely as the general population to have a current mental health problem.

Some research finds little difference between the physical health status of former foster youth and their peers, though this may be largely a function of a lack of attention to this outcome in research to date. Festinger (1983), Jones and Moses (1984), and Cook et al (1991) found no evidence of abnormal levels of physical health problems in the population they studied, while Zimmerman (1982) found that the young adults in her sample (19-29 years old at follow-up), all of whom had spent at least a year in foster care, were more likely to report their health as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’ than the general population. Among the former foster youth studied by Courtney et al (2001), Caucasians reported poorer health on a standardized self-report health measure than the general population, whereas African Americans in

Studies of former foster youth find poor levels of educational attainment; the population fairs poorly compared to its peers.

the sample reported health that was comparable to their peers. Courtney and Dworsky (2005) found that the young adults in their sample tended to describe their overall health less favorably, were more likely to report that health conditions limited their ability to engage in moderate activity, and reported more emergency room visits and more hospitalizations during the previous 5 years than their peers. Studies have found young adults who have left foster care to have difficulty obtaining affordable medical coverage, leading them to report medical problems that are left untreated (Barth 1990; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney et al 2005).

*Substance Abuse.* Studies report mixed findings with respect to the use and abuse of alcohol and illicit drugs by former foster youth. One in eight (13 percent) of subjects in the Fanshel et al (1990) study of young adults (mean age of 24 at follow-up) that had been in private-agency foster care in one state reported extreme difficulty with drug abuse in their lives. In contrast to studies that suggest a high level of drug and alcohol use among former foster youth, the national study by Cook et al (1991) found that they used alcohol and other drugs at rates similar or lower than those found in national surveys of young adults. Pecora et al (2005) found that the young adults in their study reported drug dependence at a much higher rate than the general population, but alcohol dependence at a rate similar to their peers.

*Involvement with the Criminal Justice System.* Former foster youth have a higher rate of involvement with the criminal justice system than the general population (McCord et al 1960; Zimmerman 1982; Frost and Jurich 1983; Jones and Moses 1984; Fanshel et al 1990; Barth 1990; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney and Dworsky 2006). Zimmerman (1982) found 28 percent of her male subjects and six percent of her female subjects from New Orleans had been convicted of crimes and served at least six months in prison, a much higher rate than the general population. Forty-four percent of the subjects in the Fanshel et al (1990) study had been picked up by police on charges at one time or another. The young adults in the study by Courtney et al (2005) were more likely to have engaged in several forms of delinquent and violent behavior in the past year than their peers. Moreover, 54 percent of the males and 24.5 percent of the females reported being incarcerated at least once between interviews at ages 17-18 and 21 (Courtney et al 2007).

*Employment and Economic Self-Sufficiency.* Nearly all studies of former foster youth, and all of those done in the past two decades, suggest that they face a very difficult time achieving financial independence. For example, data from several studies show that former foster youth have a higher rate of dependency on public

assistance than the general population (Pettiford 1981; Zimmerman 1982; Barth 1990; Jones and Moses 1984; Cook et al 1991; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Pecora et al 2005). Former foster youth have a higher unemployment rate than the general population (Zimmerman 1982; Jones and Moses 1984; Cook et al 1991; Goerge et al 2002; Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Courtney et al 2007; Pecora et al 2005). They also have lower wages, which frequently leave them in poverty (Zimmerman 1982; Festinger 1983; Barth 1990; Cook et al 1991; Dworsky and Courtney 2000; George et al 2002; Pecora et al 2005). For example, relatively recent studies that used unemployment insurance claims data to examine the employment patterns and earnings of former foster youth found that their mean earnings were well below the federal poverty level for from two to five years after leaving out-of-home care (Dworsky and Courtney 2000; Goerge et al 2002; Macomber et al 2008).

Not surprisingly, many former foster youth experience financial trouble during the transition to independence. Young adults in the study by Courtney and Dworsky (2006) were twice as likely as the 19 year-olds in a nationally-representative comparison group to report not having enough money to pay their rent or mortgage (12 percent), twice as likely to report being unable to pay a utility bill (12 percent), and 1.5 times as likely to report having their phone service disconnected (21 percent).

*Housing and Homelessness.* Former foster youth experience considerable housing instability (Jones and Moses 1984; Fanshel et al 1990; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Pecora et al 2005). For example, 32 percent of the youth in the national study conducted by Cook et al (1991) had lived in six or more places in the 2.5 to four years since they had exited care. Courtney et al (2001) found that 22 percent of the youth in their sample had lived in four or more places within 12 to 18 months of exiting care. Former foster youth also experience high rates of homelessness (Susser et al 1987; Sosin et al 1988; Mangine et al 1990; Sosin et al 1990; Susser et al 1991; Cook et al 1991; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Pecora et al 2005). More than one-fifth of the participants (22.2 percent) in the study by Pecora et al (2005) reported having been homeless at least once within one year of leaving foster care and 13.8 percent of the youths in the study by Courtney and Dworsky (2006) reported having been homeless at least one night since leaving care.

*Family Formation.* Research findings are mixed with respect to the likelihood that former foster youth will marry, cohabitate, or divorce. Meier (1965) and Cook (1992) found former foster youth were more likely

to remain single than their peers. In contrast, Festinger (1983) found no difference between the marital status of her subjects and those of their peers in New York. Cook et al (1991) found the marriage rate of former foster youth to be similar to that of poor young adults, though much lower than that of all young adults in the comparable age range. Meier (1965) found a higher rate of marital separation and divorce among a sample of former Minnesota foster youth than that in the general population at that time, whereas Festinger (1983) found no difference. Courtney and Dworsky (2006) found the 19 year olds in their study to be much less likely than their peers to be married or cohabiting. Cook (1992) found the former foster children represented in the National Survey of Families and Households to express less marital satisfaction than those in the overall national sample, whereas Festinger (1983) found no difference in marital satisfaction between her sample and national norms.

Studies have found that former foster youth have higher rates of out-of-wedlock parenting than their peers (Meier 1965; Festinger 1983; Cook et al 1991; Courtney and Dworsky 2006). For example, 31 percent of mothers in Festinger's (1983) sample were raising children on their own and less than one-third of the parenting females in the study by Courtney et al (2001) were married. Several studies have also shown that former foster youth have children who struggle with health, education, and behavior problems (Zimmerman 1982) and who are involved in the child welfare system (Meier 1965; Jones and Moses 1984). Forty-six percent of the parents in Zimmerman's (1982) study reported that their children had some sort of health, education or behavioral problem. Nineteen percent of former foster youth in Jones and Moses' (1984) study reported that they had a child in out-of-home care. Courtney et al (2007) found that at age 21 the young men and women in their study were more than twice as likely than their age peers to have one or more children and much more likely to have non-resident children.

*Family Relations.* Research findings are strikingly consistent with respect to the considerable ongoing contact former foster youth have with their families of origin (Harari 1980; Zimmerman 1982; Festinger 1983; Frost and Jurich 1983; Jones and Moses 1984; Barth 1990; Cook et al 1991; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney et al 2005; Courtney et al 2007). Taken together the studies suggest that former foster youth are in contact with their mothers and to a somewhat lesser degree their fathers well into young adulthood. For example, at least monthly contact between former foster youth and their mothers ranged from one-third to one-half of respondents (Harari 1980; Zimmerman 1982; Festinger

1983; Courtney et al 2001; Courtney et al 2005) with the same studies finding monthly contact with fathers to range from one-quarter to one-third of respondents. Those with siblings also maintain contact with their siblings over time. Courtney et al (2001) found 88 percent of former foster youth with at least one sibling to have visited with a sibling at least once since discharge from out-of-home care.

This level of family contact suggests a possible source of natural support for former foster youth. Most former foster youth who maintain contact with their family of origin report good relations with their kin. Festinger (1982) found that a majority of her New York respondents who were in contact with their biological families felt "very close" or "somewhat close" to their kin. Courtney et al (2005), using the same survey questions as Festinger, found similarly high levels of expressed closeness between former foster youth and their mothers, siblings, and grandparents, but less favorable relations with their fathers. Studies also consistently show that a majority of former foster youth maintain ongoing contact with their former foster families, another potential source of support during the transition (Harari 1980; Festinger 1983; Jones and Moses 1984; Courtney et al 2001).

Family relations are strong enough for many former foster youth that they go to live with kin after they leave care. Cook et al (1991) found that 54 percent of their respondents had lived within the home of a relative at some point within 2.5 to four years after leaving care. More recently, Courtney et al (2005) found that the 19 year olds in their study who had been discharged from out-of-home care were more likely to be living with family than in any other living arrangement; 16.8 percent were living in the home of one or both of their biological parents and another 17.8 percent in the home of another relative. It should be noted, however, that these young people were still about half as likely as youth their age to be living with kin.

As might be expected, however, given the troubled histories of most of these families, ongoing family relations were not without their problems. For example, Courtney et al (2001) found that one-quarter of the young adults in their sample reported experiencing problems with their family most or all of the time. Barth (1990) found that 15 percent of his California subjects felt that they had no "psychological parent" or person to turn to for advice. Samuels and Pryce (in press) report that while youth often express closeness with family, they also report ongoing difficulties managing family relationships, including parental dependence on the youth for emotional and material support. Thus, while the family of origin remains a source of support for many

former foster youth during the transition to adulthood, the youth are still less likely than their peers to be able to rely on this support; and they also must often weigh the benefits of family contact against the risks.

In summary, research findings regarding outcomes for former foster youth during their transition to adulthood are sobering. They generally bring to the transition very limited human capital upon which to build economic security. They often suffer from mental health problems that can negatively affect other outcome domains, and they often do not receive treatment for these problems once they leave care. They often become involved in crime and with the justice and corrections systems after aging out of foster care. Their employment history is poor and few escape poverty during the transition. Many experience homelessness and housing instability after leaving care. Interestingly, in spite of court-ordered separation from their families, often for many years, most former foster youth rely on their families to some extent during the transition to adulthood, though this is not always without risk.

### **The Transition to Adulthood in the US: Implications for Child Welfare Policy**

If the state as corporate parent ought to act in ways that are consistent with the ways “good” parents act towards their children, then public policy directed towards assisting foster youth making the transition to adulthood should take into account the kinds of support that young people generally can count on during this period of life. Demographers have drawn attention to the fact that traditional markers of the transition to adulthood, such as living apart from one’s parents, completion of education, family formation and financial independence, are all happening later in life than was the case for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005). Most young people today will not experience these transitions until their mid to late 20s and many not until their 30s. Along with these developments has been an extension of the period during which children are dependent upon their parents for significant care and support. For example, in 2001 approximately 63 percent of men between 18 and 24 years old and 51 percent of women in that age range were living with one or both of their parents (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Young adults in the U.S. also rely heavily on their parents for material

assistance during the transition to adulthood with parents providing roughly \$38,000 for food, housing, education, or direct cash assistance from 18–34 (Schoeni and Ross 2004). Arnett (2004) coined the term “emerging adulthood” to describe a developmental period extending from the late teens through the twenties in which young people engage in self-focused exploration as they try out different possibilities in love and work, though he acknowledges that the most disadvantaged young people are often faced with challenges during the transition to adulthood that make this experimentation difficult if not impossible.

Given the extended transition to adulthood that is normative these days, U.S. social policy directed towards assisting foster youth in transition arguably should provide states with the ability to continue to serve as a corporate parent for foster youth well into their 20s in order to

provide support during the transition period. The extant research, while limited, points to both the pitfalls of cutting off support at age 18 and the potential benefits of extended support. For example, research on foster youth transitions from care indicates that discontinuities in health insurance caused when youth age out of foster care contribute to decreases in health and mental health services utilization (Courtney et al 2005; Kushel et al 2008; McMillen and Raghavan, in press). Recent research comparing outcomes between young people allowed to remain under the care and supervision of child welfare authorities past age 18 and those that left care earlier provides some evidence that extending care results in improved outcomes in the areas of educational attainment, earnings, pregnancy, and receipt of transition services (Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack 2007; Courtney et al 2005). Similarly, a study of alumni of a private child welfare agency that compared young adult outcomes between alumni that were adopted, exited care prior to age 19, or exited care after age 19, found that extending services past age 19 was associated with better self-sufficiency and personal well-being (Kerman, Barth, & Wildfire 2002). Despite the fact that young people in the U.S. generally can expect not to be abandoned by their parents at age 18 and the growing body of research on the potential benefits of extending foster care into early adulthood, states still routinely discharge youth from care at age 18. Moreover, as I point

Traditional markers of the transition to adulthood--living apart from one’s parents, completion of education, family formation and financial independence--are all happening later in life than was the case for much of the 20th Century.

out below, services that states provide outside of foster care to help foster youth make a successful transition to adulthood are limited in important ways.

### **The Evolution of U.S. Policy Regarding the Transition to Adulthood for Foster Youth**

In the 1980s, partly in response to research identifying poor outcomes for youth aging out of foster care, child welfare advocates began to push for dedicated funding to help foster youth prepare for adulthood. In 1985, the Independent Living Initiative (Public Law 99-272) provided federal funds to states under Title IV of the Social Security Act to help foster youth prepare for independent living. Funding for the Independent Living Program (ILP) was reauthorized indefinitely in 1993 (Public Law 103-66). The ILP gave states great flexibility in terms of what kinds of services they could provide to Title IV-E eligible youth who were at least 16 and no more than 21 years old, including: outreach programs to attract eligible youth, training in daily living skills, education and employment assistance, counseling, case management, and transitional independent living plans. ILP funds could not, however, be used for room and board. The federal government required very little reporting from states about the ILP beyond creation of state ILP plans (U.S. GAO 1999). A study by the General Accounting Office found that about 60 percent of all eligible youth received some type of independent living service in 1998 (U.S. GAO 1999).

The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 (Public Law 106-169) amended Title IV-E to give states more funding and greater flexibility in operating independent living programs. The FCIA doubled federal independent living services funding to \$140 million per year, allowed states to use up to 30 percent of these funds for room and board, enabled states to assist young adults 18-21 years old who have left foster care, and permitted states to extend Medicaid eligibility to former foster children up to age 21. An amendment to the law allows Congress to appropriate \$60 million per year for education and training vouchers of up to \$5,000 per year for youth up to 23 years old.

State performance is a much higher priority under the FCIA than under earlier iterations of federal policy in this area. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is required to develop a set of outcome

measures to assess state performance in managing independent living programs, and states will be required to collect data on these outcomes; HHS issued regulations to implement these provisions of the law in 2007. The data requirements include collecting information on transition outcomes from cohorts of foster youth in each state at age 17, 19 and 21. Over time this could potentially build a nationwide longitudinal database on the transition to adulthood, at least through age 21, for foster youth in the U.S. In addition, the FCIA requires that 1.5 percent of funding under the statute be set aside for rigorous evaluations of promising independent living programs (i.e., using random-assignment evaluation designs whenever possible). The program created by the FCIA is named the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the “Chafee Program”) after the late Senator

The primary purpose of federal policy has been to render foster youth “independent” or, in other words, to end their dependence on the state.

John Chafee.

The Independent Living Initiative and Foster Care Independence Act exhibit characteristics that exemplify the philosophy guiding U.S. policy towards foster youth making the transition to adulthood for more than two decades. First, both the names of the laws and their provisions make clear that the primary purpose of federal policy is to render foster youth “independent” or, in other words, to end their dependence on the state. Both laws emphasize what might be called soft services intended to help young people become self-sufficient but prohibit or severely limit the kinds of concrete support for basic needs often provided by families for their adult children. The 1985 law did not allow states to use program funds for room and board, and the 1999 law’s provision allowing states to use up to 30 percent of funds for room and board barely scratched the surface of the need for such support (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring 2005). Second, neither of these laws fundamentally altered the fact that U.S. policy, by ending funding for the foster care program at age 18, encourages states to abdicate their corporate parenting role when young people reach the age of majority. The Title IV-E entitlement to reimbursement of foster care maintenance and administration costs is by far the greatest source of federal funding for foster care. Thus, in the absence of IV-E reimbursement beyond age 18, only a handful of child welfare jurisdictions have extended foster care past 18. Once a young person has been discharged from foster care, the state no longer has any legal responsibility to provide the young

person with help of any kind.

Given this lack of accountability, it is perhaps not surprising that significant gaps remain in the safety net for foster youth making the transition to adulthood. Youth aging out of foster care continue to receive relatively little in the way of transition services despite the available research suggesting that many have needs across all of the domains of functioning targeted by independent living programs. Prior to the increase in funding provided by the 1999 law, U.S. government estimates suggested that two-fifths of eligible foster youth did not receive any independent living services (U.S. GAO 1999). Although the situation appears to have improved somewhat in the wake of increased federal funding, a GAO survey of state independent living coordinators found that large percentages of older youth—up to 90 percent in some states—still do not receive many of the services called for in the law (U.S. GAO 2004). Several years after the new funds became available Courtney et al (2004) asked 17-18 year old foster youth in three Midwestern states to report on whether they had received support services or training in the areas of educational support, employment/vocational support, budget and financial management, housing, and health education. Depending on service domain, between one-third and one-half of youth reported that they had not received any service in a given domain. The likelihood of service receipt declined significantly after age 18 for those young people who had left care (Courtney et al 2007).

That former foster youth often lose access to health insurance at 18 is particularly problematic given their relatively high need for services, particularly mental health services. Perhaps because so few of them retain responsibility for youth over age 18, most states have not taken up the option of extending Medicaid to former foster youth through age 21 (Patel & Roherty 2007). It appears that in states where the Medicaid extension does not exist most youth exiting foster care find themselves without health insurance (Courtney et al 2001; Courtney et al 2005). Recent research has shown a relationship between exiting foster care, loss of health insurance, and reductions in health and mental health services utilization (Courtney et al 2001; Courtney et al 2005; Kushel et al 2007; McMillen and Raghavan, in press).

Fortunately, recent developments in federal child welfare policy lay the groundwork for significant improvement in the state's role as corporate parent for

youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care. The Fostering Connections Act allows states, at their option, to provide care and support to youth in foster care until the age of 21 provided that the youth is either 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. The protections and requirements currently in place for younger children in foster care would continue to apply for youth ages 18-21. Youth ages 18-21 could be

placed in a supervised setting in which they are living independently, as well as in a foster family home, kinship foster home, or group care facility. States could also extend adoption assistance and/or guardianship payments on behalf of youth through age 21 if the adoption or guardianship was arranged after

the youth's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Fostering Connections Act also requires child welfare agencies to help youth with the transition to adulthood by requiring, during the 90-day period immediately before a youth exits from care between ages 18 and 21, that the young person's caseworker, and other representatives as appropriate, helps the young person develop a personal transition plan. The plan must be as detailed as the youth chooses and include specific options on housing, health insurance, education, local opportunities for mentoring, continuing support services, workforce supports and employment services. The new law does not alter the Chafee Program, meaning that states can still use Chafee funds for a wide range of transition services.

I now turn to an examination of the opportunities presented by the Fostering Connections Act and limitations of U.S. policy that will need to be addressed if the new policy framework is to realize its full promise.

### **New Opportunities and Lingering Challenges**

The Fostering Connections Act is a fundamental reform of U.S. child welfare policy directed towards the transition to adulthood for foster youth. First, it marks a philosophical shift towards acknowledging continuing state responsibility for corporate parenting of foster youth into early adulthood. Title IV-E is the policy and fiscal backbone of the U.S. foster care system, and providing IV-E support to age 21 represents a fundamental shift away from the idea that state responsibility for the

The Fostering Connections Act marks a philosophical shift towards acknowledging continuing state responsibility for corporate parenting of foster youth into early adulthood.

well-being of foster youth ends at the age of majority. The title of the law suggests a move away from an exclusive focus on encouraging youth to be *independent* towards efforts to help youth make the *connections* they will need to be successful during the transition. The law's provisions clearly convey the idea that state-supervised out-of-home care for young adults ought to differ in significant ways from care provided to minors. In order to claim IV-E funding for youth over 18, states will need to engage these young adults in activities that are developmentally appropriate (e.g., higher education and employment), and HHS is required to develop regulations that will allow states to create more developmentally-appropriate care settings for young adults (e.g., supervised independent living arrangements).

Second, in giving states entitlement funding for providing transition-age youth with basic necessities and case management services, the law provides a foundation upon which states can better array a range of services and supports for these youth. While many states at least on paper have policies that call for provision of independent living services through age 21 (e.g., state independent living plans), the poor economic circumstances of youth who leave care and resulting instability of their living arrangements arguably undermine efforts to engage these young people in services. This might explain why Courtney and colleagues (2007) found that foster youth in Illinois, which allows youth to remain in care to age 21, were much more likely than their peers in Iowa and Wisconsin, who were generally discharged at 18, to have received a variety of transition services between 19 and 21. The ability to use IV-E funds to stably house foster youth between 18 and 21 may allow states to better engage youth in Chafee Program-funded services. Giving state child welfare agencies IV-E funding to continue providing case management beyond age 18 may also help these agencies play the kind of coordinating role that is necessary to help young people navigate the various public institutions that should also be engaged in the corporate parenting role (i.e., post-secondary education; workforce development; health and mental health services; housing).

While the Fostering Connections Act creates a Federal policy framework that gives state child welfare agencies the tools to fundamentally change the way that the U.S. supports foster youth in transition to adulthood, several challenges remain in the way of significant progress. These challenges include the probability that many states will not take up the option of

extending foster care past age 18, the poor knowledge base regarding the effectiveness of independent living and other transition services, the lack of established and well-evaluated models of coordination between child welfare agencies and other public institutions in providing support to foster youth, the complexities of maximizing “permanency” for foster youth in transition, and the fact that the law’s eligibility requirements still exclude high-risk populations that arguably should be served. Several lines of research will be needed along the way if states are to have the knowledge base to seriously address these challenges.

*Continuing Ambivalence of States Towards Parenting Young Adults.* Although the Fostering Connections Act gives states the option of using Title IV-E funds to provide care and supervision to young people to age 21, it is far from clear that many states will take up the option. Continuing concern in Congress that young people allowed to remain in foster care past 18 would simply remain “dependent” on the state and not engage in the kinds of activities needed to make a successful

It is far from clear that many states will take up the option to extend care past age 18

transition from care contributed to the provisions of the Fostering Connections Act regarding requiring youths’ participation in such activities.<sup>3</sup> Similar concern at the state level could block efforts to pass enabling state legislation. The slow rate at which states have taken up the option to extend Medicaid to former foster youth through age 21 should temper the optimism of advocates who might hope for quick action by states to extend their foster care programs to young people over 18.

Making the case at the state level for the benefits of extending care might be easier if there was stronger empirical evidence of the benefits of extended care to young people in terms of their well-being and the benefits to taxpayers of preventing outcomes that are costly to society (e.g., early or unwanted pregnancy; crime; dependence on other forms of government assistance). While there is some evidence to support extended care as a protective factor during the transition to adulthood for foster youth (Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack 2007; Kerman, Barth, & Wildfire 2002), this evidence is far from definitive. Moreover, it remains unclear exactly

3 For an example of the tone of the discussion in Congress about the provisions of the Fostering Connections Act regarding conditions required of youth to remain in care, see the comments by Representative Gerald Weller (R-IL) (Congressional Record, 2008). Initial versions of legislation introduced to extend IV-E funding through age 21 did not include detailed requirements regarding what youth needed to do to remain eligible for assistance.

## Commentary

**Jane Waldfogel**  
**Columbia University School of Social Work**

The recent uproar over Nebraska's safe haven law – which was intended to provide shelter for vulnerable infants but resulted in parents dropping off older children and adolescents – has highlighted the role of state child welfare agencies as the system of last resort for troubled youth. As Mark Courtney points out in his informative overview of the policy context for older youth in care, most children who enter the child welfare system in early or middle childhood exit that system during childhood, whether to return home to their family or to join a new family through adoption or legal guardianship. However, as those children are exiting care, an older group of troubled children and youth are entering the system. And it is these children and youth who disproportionately remain in the system through late adolescence, often leaving only when they run away, transition to another system (such as juvenile justice), rejoin their families of origin, or “age out” of the system.

Courtney and other researchers have documented just how poor the outcomes are for the older youth who “age out” of the child welfare system. Across a host of dimensions, they fare worse than other youth in early adulthood and in later life. However, Courtney is rightly cautious in attributing blame for their poor outcomes to the failings of the child welfare system. As he notes, many of these youth entered the system fairly late in adolescence, and with pre-existing problems that presaged poor outcomes as adults. Nevertheless, the fact that many of these youth are troubled to begin with does not absolve the child welfare system of responsibility for doing what it can to improve their life chances.

The new federal legislation that Courtney describes will make it easier for child welfare agencies to exercise this responsibility, but doing so will not be straightforward. As Courtney points out, the existing research as to which specific policies and services might improve outcomes for these youth is extremely limited. As states expand their involvement with youth on the verge of leaving the child welfare system, they will need to experiment with new approaches to better serve these youth. I am more optimistic than Courtney about the role that mentoring programs might play, but agree with him that these need to be rigorously studied, as much will depend on whether suitable mentors can be recruited or whether the youth referred to these programs will end up disappointed. I agree with Courtney that there is a role for tighter linkages with other child and youth serving systems. I would particularly emphasize collaboration with the juvenile justice system, which faces many of the same challenges, and often with the same youth. I would also emphasize links with educational programs. Particularly in today's difficult economic climate, young people exiting foster care, in common with other low-income youth, will have difficulty entering, paying for, and completing college. Yet the need for a college education, as a route out of poverty and as a way of being able to provide an adequate standard of living for the next generation of children, has never been greater. If child welfare agencies do not adequately prepare and support young people to enter, pay for, and complete college, the chances are good that their children in turn will struggle. The standards for success for young adults have been raised, and the child welfare system must raise its expectations for these youth accordingly. Finally, I think there is a need for a greater role for asset-building programs, to support these youth in establishing some savings that can be used to pay for higher education or housing when they make the transition out of the child welfare system. Even with the extension of services to older youth, there will still come a time when youth who were formerly in the child welfare system are discharged to get by on their own. The more assets—in particular, the more human capital, social capital, and financial capital—they have in place before that discharge, the better their prospects will be.

## Commentary

**Robert Schwartz**  
**Executive Director, Juvenile Law Center**  
**Jennifer Pokempner**

**Supervising Attorney, Youth in Transition Project, Juvenile Law Center**

Older youth in foster care have faced more obstacles than society can easily remove; they have had few legal handles with which their lawyers can open doors to opportunity. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, P.L. 110-351 (“the Act”), removes some obstacles and gives youths’ lawyers more tools. Mark Courtney’s article provides wise guide-posts and warning signs for policy makers and practitioners.

Courtney’s appropriate call for a “corporate parent” for foster youth suggests that while the new federal law has promise, there are promises that the child welfare system alone cannot keep. This is because the state as “corporate parent” is like an extended family in which there is an uneven distribution of legal obligations and resources. For better or worse, the child welfare system is the primary parent with most of the legal obligations. There is a strong argument, however, that youth raised by the state should have entitlements from other “family members” such as those that provide housing, education, health care and employment.

Even so, the Fostering Connections Act usefully increases child welfare’s planning responsibilities and requires that it pay more heed to the child’s wishes and to matters of child well-being. The new law requires child welfare systems to engage other systems, even if no other system has a legal obligation that can be easily enforced.

This suggests that the new law is a starting point, but that there is still work to be done on implementation and enforcement. Courtney’s valuable distillation of the available literature makes clear that child welfare will need more funds and expertise to guarantee youth access to services from other systems that are essential to their transition to adulthood. For example, although the Act will promote educational stability for many foster youth through a stay-put provision, the guarantee that youth can stay in their “home” schools will only be meaningful if the education system works with the child welfare system to implement this requirement.

The Act importantly recognizes that foster youth who hit age 18 are likely to have many needs; they have often had experiences that interrupted child and adolescent development. It is reassuring that the new law has a definition of child that creates eligibility for federal foster care maintenance payments that goes well beyond what states now require. The law gives states opportunities to extend care beyond 18 to youth who are employed or in job training, or in school; it also provides a useful expansion of eligible living arrangements.

However, it is unclear whether the new law will succeed in addressing “the paradox of immaturity.” Those youth who are the least prepared for the adult world may be the first to say “no” to the opportunity to stay in care past age 18. Youth who have experienced many of the challenges described by Courtney may find the prospect of staying in care past 18 an opportunity that they are happy to decline. Even if they realize that they are not quite ready to be on their own, they may feel that a system that has served them so badly is no longer one upon which they should rely. This highlights two challenges that the Act raises, to which states must respond.

First, the Act as a whole addresses youth well-being and the achievement of positive outcomes. The Act and the imminent implementation of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), will require the child welfare system to be concerned about youth outcomes, not just the provision of services. The Act gives states more than the opportunity to have youth stay longer in care—it challenges states to provide services differently. Youth will not be better off by staying in a system that does not prepare them for adulthood and connect them to opportunities and services, to family and support.

Second, the Act reflects the need to embrace principles of adolescent development. It is equally important that state laws reflect this principle. Many teens leave home when they become adults, yet most know that their family’s door remains open to them. Foster youth must not only be given the opportunity to receive support past age 18, but they should, like their non-placement peers, be able to return and ask for—and receive—assistance from their primary parent, the child welfare system. While the Act does not mandate that youth be permitted to re-enter the system, it does not foreclose that possibility.

what aspects of extended support are most important in helping foster youth to experience successful transitions.

Fortunately, the implementation of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) provisions requiring states to track transition outcomes for foster youth between ages 17 and 21 can provide the kind of information infrastructure necessary to assess how between-state variation in state policy and service provision, including state policy concerning when youth are discharged from care, influence transition outcomes. The American Public Human Services Association and the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago have formed a partnership to engage states in planning for the NYTD. A major focus of this effort is to ensure that data elements will go beyond the outcomes called for in federal law (e.g., employment, education, pregnancy, homelessness, and risk behaviors) to include data on the kinds of services and supports provided to youth regardless of whether they are still in care. Policymakers at the state level may find it easier to support extending care past age 18 if analysis of between-state differences in outcomes for foster youth in transition continues to support existing research findings regarding the benefits of extending care.

*Lack of Knowledge Regarding the Effectiveness of Services.* Another challenge to improving policy and practice directed towards foster youth transitions to adulthood is the poor knowledge base supporting existing interventions. Policymakers and practitioners want to know “what works” in helping foster youth successfully transition to adulthood, but sound empirical evidence is hard to come by. The field of youth services has developed in recent years general youth development principles, but remarkably little empirical evidence exists to support particular independent living and transition services. A review of evaluation research on the effectiveness of independent living services found no experimental evaluations of independent living programs (Montgomery et al 2006). While the authors of the study reviewed eight non-randomized controlled studies and found some evidence that some programs may have protective effects, they conclude that the weak methodological quality of the evidence tempers the validity of those findings. Recently, as part of the federally-funded program of evaluation research on independent living programs called for by the FCIA, HHS has released

the findings of experimental evaluations of a life skills training program and a tutoring-mentoring program in Los Angeles County, California (US. DHHS 2008a; 2008b). While the evaluations provide important insight into the continuing challenges facing foster youth and a better sense of the services provided to them, neither of the interventions demonstrated an effect on any of the outcomes the programs were intended to improve

Because of the paucity of studies that evaluate the effectiveness of independent living programs and the numerous methodological limitations of nearly all those that do exist, no definitive statement can be made about program effectiveness. Even less is known about the

Other public institutions are not always eager to assist the child welfare system in corporate parenting.

effectiveness of independent living programs with respect to specific populations. Only a focused and sustained program of rigorous evaluation research will remedy this situation. This research will need to involve experimental designs, larger samples than have been employed in the past, and better measurement

of both the interventions and outcomes of interest. The program of evaluation research funded through the Chafee Program is a step in the right direction, but it will not be sufficient to move policy and practice forward on its own.

*Poor Coordination of the Various “Arms” of the State.* Poor integration and coordination of the efforts of the child welfare system with the efforts of other public institutions continues to limit the effectiveness of corporate parenting of foster youth in transition to adulthood. To be sure, current and former foster youth are generally eligible for whatever services exist in a given community for young adults that face challenges making the transition to adulthood (e.g., vocational rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities). In fact, in recent years federal policy has evolved to make foster youth in transition a target population for federally- and state-funded educational, employment, and housing programs (Congressional Research Service 2008). Moreover, growing out of the 2003 White House Task Force Report on Disadvantaged Youth, the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Justice and Labor have committed to a collaborative approach at the national, state, and local levels through an initiative called Shared Youth Vision to develop innovative programs, enhance the quality of services delivered, improve efficiencies, and improve the outcomes for the youth served by these agencies. Foster youth and former foster youth are one target of

these coordination efforts at the federal level and in the states participating in the initiative, though it is too soon to assess whether these efforts have been effective at improving services or youth outcomes.

While the relatively new focus in targeting federal programs towards foster youth and better coordinating the efforts of those programs is hopeful news, it remains to be seen if goodwill can overcome organizational dynamics to deliver good outcomes for youth. In many jurisdictions, child welfare agencies attempt to reinvent the wheel by providing services that are not within their primary realms of expertise. For example, many public agencies provide employment services for foster youth directly or through contracts instead of working with existing workforce development agencies that have experienced job developers and trainers and longstanding relationships with local employers. Similarly, the influx of Chafee Program funding for transitional housing has led some public child welfare agencies to attempt to develop new housing programs on their own or with traditional residential care providers, instead of working with existing providers of services to runaway and homeless youth; historically few child welfare agencies had funding for transitional housing, leaving runaway and homeless youth service providers to pioneer the creation of transitional housing programs serving foster youth.

The desire by child welfare agencies to go it alone may be at least partly a recognition that other public institutions are not always eager to assist the child welfare system in corporate parenting of the children of the state. For example, in an age of increased public accountability for achieving improvement in measurable outcomes related to their core missions, providers of educational and employment supports may be reluctant to engage foster youth given the many challenges they often bring with them; if one is engaged in “creaming” of an eligible population, foster youth may not rise to the top.

At any rate, ensuring that foster youth have the range of services and supports at their disposal to maximize their potential for success will require more coordination and integration of services than currently takes place and evaluation research directed towards identifying the most promising approaches to corporate parenting. State child welfare agencies that are able to provide ongoing case management past age 18 as a result of state legislative action to implement the Fostering Connection Act may be in an enhanced position to

facilitate such coordination.

*Making sense of “permanency” for foster youth in transition.* In recent years policymakers and child advocates have called for greater efforts to ensure “permanency” for youth aging out of foster care, arguing that too often the foster care system allows young people to age out of care with no connection to a permanent family (Frey, Greenblatt, & Brown, 2007). The success of these advocacy efforts can be seen in the provisions of the Fostering Connections Act extending adoption and guardianship subsidies from 18 to 21, which reflect the concern that failing to do so would undermine the permanency of these family relationships. Advocates

have also called for programmatic efforts to create and support foster youths’ relationships with non-related adults, drawing upon research evidence regarding the importance of permanent supportive relationships and connections to an adult for the long- and short-term wellbeing of young people

generally (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger 2002), as well as research showing positive associations between informal mentoring relationships and adult outcomes for former foster youth (Ahrens et al 2008).

While the interest in creating interventions to foster the development of lasting connections between foster youth and unrelated adults is understandable, it should be done with caution for at least two reasons. First, it is one thing to observe an association between positive youth-adult relationships and positive outcomes for youth, but quite another to go about creating such relationships through social service programs. Scholarship on youth mentoring gives reason for caution in developing mentoring programs for vulnerable youth (Spencer 2006). Moreover, these young people have generally experienced multiple failed relationships with adults who were supposed to care for them, including their parents and adults in failed foster care placements; the last thing they need is yet another failed relationship with an adult. Research is sorely needed on how natural mentoring relationships are formed and maintained by foster youth, and emerging programs intended to create new supportive relationships for foster youth should be rigorously evaluated.

Second, recent research suggests that most foster youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care feel close to and are in regular contact with one or more members of their family of origin (Courtney et al 2005; Courtney et al 2007), though, not surprisingly,

The interest in creating interventions to foster lasting connections between foster youth and unrelated adults is understandable, but it should be done with caution.

many of those relationships pose serious challenges for the young people (Courtney et al 2001; Samuels 2008; Samuels & Pryce in press). Unfortunately, the child welfare field continues to fail to take full account of the enduring relationships that the vast majority of foster youth maintain with their families. As states take up the option to continue to care for foster youth as young adults, it will be increasingly important for policymakers and practitioners to acknowledge that in most cases the state is actually *co-parenting* these young people. Research is needed to help child welfare authorities understand how to do this well.

*Too Narrowly Defining the Population Needing Corporate Parenting.* Perhaps the most important limitation of current policy, and the provisions of the new Fostering Connections Act, is the target population. As noted above few youth actually age out of the child welfare system, yet this population remains the primary focus of federal law. By including youth that exit foster care after their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday to adoption or legal guardianship in the population eligible for continuing assistance, the Fostering Connections Act significantly expands the population that is likely to receive help from the child welfare system in making the transition to adulthood. However, a large number of young people who remain in state care late into adolescence but who exit prior to the age of majority are still left out.

Many foster youth, even those who have been in out-of-home care for some time, are discharged from care to a member of their family of origin. This group dwarfs in size the group that ages out of care (Wulczyn & Brunner Hislop 2001). Child welfare services providers seldom reach out to these youth, even those that received independent living services while they were in care, both because they are generally not funded by government to do so and because they assume that the task of helping these young people manage the transition to adulthood has passed back to the family. Yet, at some point, generally not too far in the distant past, society forcibly separated these same families from their children. Moreover, research suggests that many of these familial relationships are tenuous at best and that many of these youth will find themselves in need of another place to live and other adults to rely on for advice before long (Cook et al 1991; Courtney et al 2001).

What of the children who run away from out-of-home care in the year or so before reaching the age of majority (Courtney et al 2005; Finkelstein et al 2004)? These youth may be the most at-risk of poor adult outcomes, and there are more of them than there are youth who age out of care. This group can be very difficult to engage in services, yet, as media reports point out, too often child welfare agencies make little or no effort to

reconnect with these youth when they leave out-of-home care (Anderson 2002; Kresnak 2002).

The next round of federal child welfare reform legislation and state policy reform efforts should seriously consider the wisdom of excluding from ongoing support young people who return home to their families shortly before the age of majority and those who exit from care to runaway status. Moreover, federal rulemaking in implementing the Foster Connections Act should consider the conditions under which young people who choose to exit care after age 18 may reenter care at a later date. Since it is quite normal for young people to try to go it alone as young adults only to need to return to the nest for some period if things get rough, policy should not constrain child welfare authorities from making provision for similar opportunities for foster youth in transition. One way to address the current arbitrariness of eligibility policy regarding the transition to adulthood for foster youth would be to make any young person who spent some minimum amount of time in state care after the age of 16 eligible to return to care through age 21.

The past two decades have seen the rapid evolution of U.S. social policy directed towards supporting the transition to adulthood for youth in state care. From a policy framework that did not acknowledge youths' transitions from care at all, to one that emphasized preparing foster youth to be completely independent at the age of majority, the U.S. is now poised to make a major commitment to corporate parenting of the children of the state into early adulthood. While this latest shift makes sense in terms of what average parents do for their children these days and the limited track record of states taking on this role provides grounds for optimism, it is likely that the next several years will see the rapid development of a wide range of state and local strategies for carrying out this new task of government. Policy and program development should actively involve the young adults who will be most affected by these experiments in state parenting. In addition, the government agencies and philanthropic entities involved in generating new ideas would be well advised to invest in the kinds of research and evaluation along the way that will be necessary for the new policy regime to be successful.

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## About the Authors

**Mark E. Courtney** is Professor and Ballmer Chair in Child Well-Being in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington. He is also director of Partners for Our Children, a public-private partnership housed at the University of Washington devoted to improving child welfare services. Dr. Courtney previously served on the faculties of the University of Chicago, where he was Director of the Chapin Hall Center for Children from 2001-2006, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Much of his research has focused on child welfare services and policy. His current work includes studies of the adult functioning of former foster children, experimental evaluation of independent living services for foster youth, and the experiences of families involved in welfare-to-work programs. Before moving into academia, he worked for several years in various capacities providing group home care to abused and neglected adolescents.

**Jenny Pokempner** is the Supervising Attorney for Juvenile Law Center's Youth in Transition Project. She focuses on issues relating to teenagers and young adults who are transitioning out of the child welfare system and homeless teens. Jenny teaches Parent, Child, and the State at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and Temple Law School. Jenny was the lead author of the following publications: *DEPENDENT YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE IN PENNSYLVANIA: A JUDICIAL GUIDE* (Pokempner and Rosado, 2003), *KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: A GUIDE FOR YOUTH IN SUBSTITUTE CARE* (JLC, Kids-Voice, Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board 2006); "*Adolescents, the Foster Care System, and the Transition to Adulthood: What Legal Aid Lawyers Need to Know*" in *CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW* (July/August 2005).

**Robert Schwartz** co-founded Juvenile Law Center in 1975 and has been its executive director since 1982. He has represented dependent and delinquent children in Pennsylvania juvenile and appellate courts; brought class-action litigation over institutional conditions and probation functions; testified in Congress; and spoken in over 30 states on matters related to children and the law. From 1992-98, and 2006-08, he was chair of the Juvenile Justice Committee of the American Bar Association's Criminal Justice. From 1996 to 2006 he was a member of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, and co-edited *Youth on Trial: A Developmental Perspective on Juvenile Justice* (University of Chicago Press: 2000). Schwartz chairs the

Advisory Committee to the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, and is chair of the board of the Philadelphia Youth Network.

**Jane Waldfogel** is a professor of social work and public affairs at Columbia University School of Social Work and a research associate at the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion at the London School of Economics. Waldfogel received her Ph.D. in public policy from Harvard University and has written extensively on the impact of public policies on child and family well-being. A former child protective services worker, she is the author of *The Future of Child Protection: How to Break the Cycle of Abuse and Neglect* (Harvard University Press, 1998) and *What Children Need* (Harvard University Press, 2006). She is also co-editor (with Sheldon Danziger) of *Securing the Future: Investing in Children from Birth to Adulthood* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2000) and co-editor (with Katherine Magnuson) of *Steady Gains and Stalled Progress: Inequality and the Black-White Test Score Gap* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

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