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The Casey Young Adult Survey

Findings over Three Years

The Casey Young Adult Survey: Findings over Three Years

INTRODUCTION

The Casey Young Adult Survey (CYAS) is an annual cohort study of 19-, 22-, and 25-year-olds that examined outcomes among young adults who received foster care services from Casey Family Programs (Casey). The study examined experiences while in care and outcomes after leaving care. The CYAS was conducted every year between 2004 and 2006; this summary report includes combined findings for all three years of CYAS data collection. (For comprehensive 2005 and 2006 CYAS reports and executive summaries that include recommendations for policy and practice, go to www.casey.org.)

STUDY METHODS

Eligible young adults for the study met these three conditions:

- Received foster care, adoption, or guardianship services from Casey field offices for 12 months or more (not necessarily continuously)
- Were age 19, 22, or 25 at the time of the interview
- Were mentally able to complete the phone interview

Casey offices in Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming served the young adults in the study.

Prior to data collection, the Casey Human Subjects Review Committee approved the study interview and protocol.

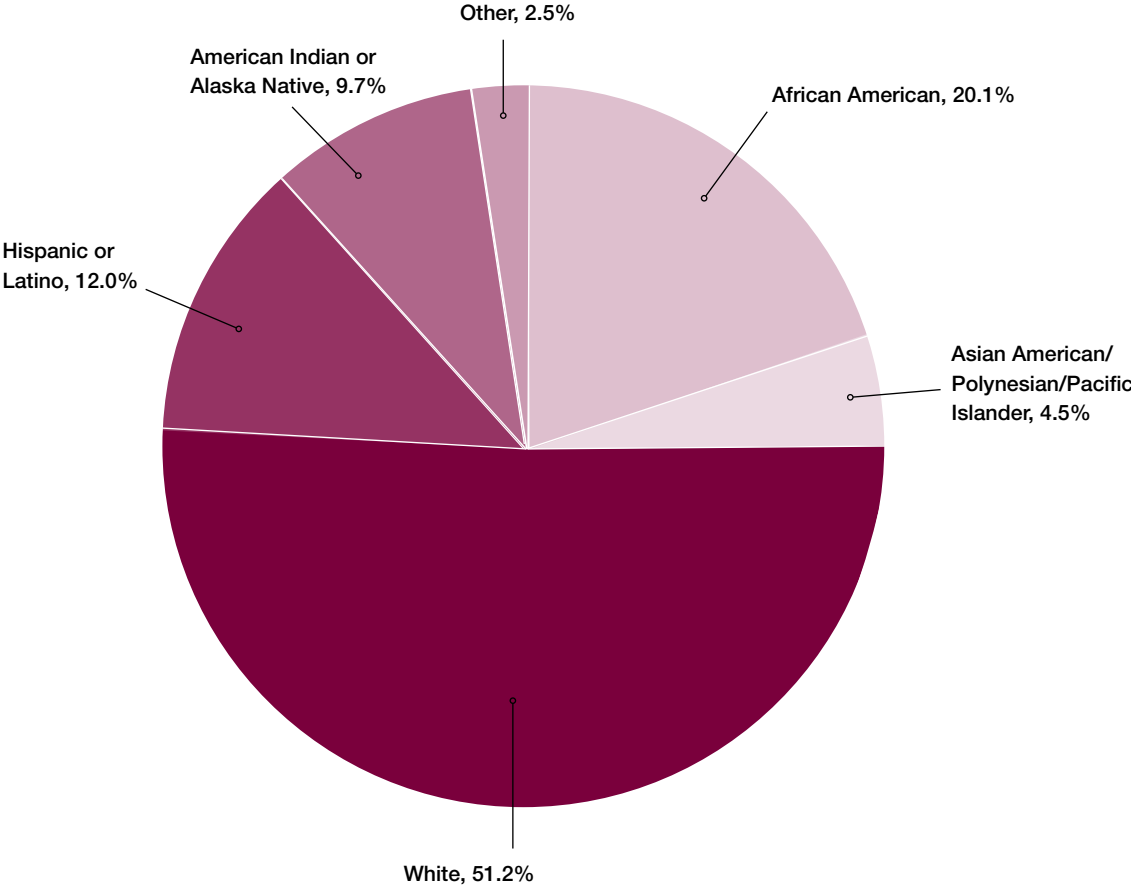
Locating young adults presented a significant challenge. Through experience and with the assistance of professional trackers, however, the location rates improved greatly in each year of data collection. Trained interviewers from the University of Pittsburgh conducted telephone interviews, which lasted about an hour. The overall response rate for this study was 48.3% (2004: 40.1%; 2005: 52.3%; 2006: 56.3%), and the refusal rate was 2.5%.

A total of 557 sample members were interviewed (2004: $n=198$; 2005: $n=194$; 2006: $n=166$).¹ The majority of respondents were women (65.2%). Just over half of the respondents were white (51.2%; see Figure 1). Age cohorts were represented almost equally in the sample (19-year-olds: 32.9%, 22-year olds: 36.3%, and 25-year-olds: 30.9%). There were no statistically significant differences in sample demographics between the three years of data collection.

Since whites and females were overrepresented in the interviewed sample, data were weighted on these demographic variables (i.e., gender and race/ethnicity) to adjust for nonresponse bias.

¹ In 2004 and 2005, the entire eligible population was sampled. In 2006, however, due to a larger population and a restricted budget, the researchers elected to select a stratified random sample (based on age) from the eligible population of 470.

Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of the Casey Young Adult Survey respondents



Outcome Highlights for the Combined Samples (N=557)

EXPERIENCE IN CASEY CARE

CYAS results

- Most (92.5%) of the young adults interviewed had received foster care services from Casey, while fewer were placed in adoption (8.9%) and guardianship (15.3%).
- Nearly half (48.1%) of the sample participated in Casey's formal transition services at some point, and over one in three (37.9%) young adults had participated in the Continuing Education and Job Training (CEJT) program.
- Nearly all (97.8%) of the study participants had exited from Casey's foster care, adoption, or guardianship by the time of the interview.
- The majority (87.9%) of respondents reported having had a close relationship with an adult while in care, with slightly fewer having had a close friend about their age (84.7%).

INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS

CYAS results

- Nearly four in five Casey young adults (78.2%) had an official copy of their birth certificate, just fewer than three in four had any kind of bank account (74.2%), but nearly all (94.4%) had a driver's license or state ID card.

For comparison

- Several foster care follow-up studies have found that less than half of alumni possessed items such as a driver's license or bank account when interviewed after leaving care or preparing to leave care (Courtney et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2004; Cook, 1991).

Recommendation

- Make sure that transitioning youth have a written transition plan, which can provide necessary guidance for the transition process. Youth should be included in the development of this plan to ensure that they understand and support it. Additionally, youth could be provided with a toolbox of important personal documents (e.g., birth certificate, ID) as well as phone numbers to call when they need help (e.g., housing assistance, substance abuse recovery).

LIVING SITUATION

CYAS results

- Nearly all Casey young adults (92.5%) reported that they felt safe where they lived.
- Most (88.3%) of the Casey young adults were living in a less restrictive living situation than foster care, such as in apartments by themselves, with friends, or with family members.
- Over half (51.4%) of the respondents were living independently with others at the time of the interview. Nearly one in five (17.4%) was living independently by himself or herself, and about one in eight (13.2%) was living with a relative or a friend.

For comparison

- In the second wave of the Midwest Study, Courtney et al. found that nearly 30% of participants (28.7%) were living independently at the time of the interview.

- In a study of emancipated 20- and 21-year-olds in the Midwest, 17% were living independently by themselves, and over two in five (41.0%) were living independently with others (Mech, 1999).
- Mech's study also found that 5% of respondents were incarcerated at the time of the interview, compared to 3% in the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2005).

HOMELESSNESS

CYAS results

- Many (19.8%) Casey young adults had been homeless since leaving care. Those who experienced homelessness were homeless for substantial periods of time: two in five (41.3%) had been homeless for one to three months, and nearly as many (37.7%) were homeless for more than three months.

For comparison

- The Casey National and Northwest Alumni Studies found that nearly one-fourth of respondents had been homeless for at least one night (23.7% and 22.2%, respectively) within a year of leaving care (Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005).
- Other studies in a variety of regions have also found high rates of homelessness among participants, ranging from 13% (Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney, et al., 2005) to 25% (Cook, 1994), and 49% (Fowler & Toro, 2006) of interviewed samples.

Recommendation

- Emphasize permanency while youth are in care. Connecting youth with supportive adults while in care and stressing permanence could play a significant role in providing young adults

with more stability after care. This could include conducting birth family search or family group conferencing to locate family members or mentors within the youth's family or community. Creating something like the Permanency Pact, which is a pledge by a supportive adult to provide specific supports to a young person in foster care, can reassure youth who aren't adopted or in guardianship.² With the pact, youth know that they have someone they can rely on for housing and other assistance once they have left care. It is important for young adults to know that it is common to need help with independent living and that asking for help is okay.

MENTAL HEALTH

CYAS results

- Young adults in the CYAS scored higher than young adults in the general population on symptoms for all mental health disorders measured.
- Rates of symptom levels were particularly high for the study sample for psychoticism (2.8 times higher than the general population), paranoid ideation (2.5 times higher), obsessive compulsive disorder (2.4 times higher), depression (2.1 times higher), and interpersonal sensitivity (2.1 times higher).
- Overall, about one in five young adults (21.4%) were considered likely to have a diagnosable psychiatric disorder.
- About one in fifteen respondents (6.4%) were experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the month prior to the interview.

For comparison

- Courtney et al. found that one-quarter (25.0%) of

² See www.fosterclub.com/pdfs/PermPact.pdf

all 19-year-olds had at least one diagnosis in the past 12 months and one-third (33.3%) had at least one lifetime diagnosis (2005).

- Another study found that 42% of participants had experienced a problem with depression or sadness and 22% reported problems with suicidal thoughts (Barth, 1990). Over two-fifths of the former foster youth in a Washington state study scored high on a depression scale (Brandford & English, 2004) and nearly one in eight (11.6%) young adults who had left care in the Midwest Study sample experienced major depression or dysthymia in their lifetime (Courtney et al., 2005).
- PTSD rates for other studies range from 6.9% to 25.2%, a variance which may be the result of age differences and different measures (Pecora et al., 2003, 2005; Courtney et al., 2005).

Recommendations

- Incorporate alcohol, drug, and substance abuse therapy in mental health services.
- Expand access to mental health services for young adults after they leave care.
- Conduct further research on the mental health of youth in transition from foster care to independent living.
- Teach youth and families to be advocates for mental health services.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

CYAS results

- More than one-third (35.7%) of Casey young adults did not have health insurance at the time of the interview.

- About two-thirds of the sample (63.7%) did not smoke at the time of the interview, and nearly three-fourths (72.2%) had not used any illegal drugs in the past year. Over half (51.7%) scored positive on a screener for alcohol problems, however.
- Over half (56.0%) rated their overall physical health as very good or excellent.

For comparison

- About half of 19-year-olds in one study (52.9%) and 22-year-old participants in another foster care study (47.1%) were without health insurance at the time of the interview (Courtney et al., 2005; Alexander & Huberty, 1993). The Northwest Alumni Study found that two in three (67.0%) were covered.
- The health insurance coverage rate for 18- to 24- year-olds in the general population was 68.6% (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2005).
- Among young adults in the general population, 15.1% had problems with alcohol, 61.4% had had at least one drink of alcohol in the past year, 20.3% had used illegal drugs in the past year, and 40.2% currently smoke (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004).
- Many young adults in foster care follow-up studies screened positive for alcohol-related problems, had used illegal drugs, and smoked (Courtney et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2003; Barth, 1990; Cook, 1991; Festinger, 1983).
- Over half of the participants in several studies rated their overall health as very good or excellent (Courtney et al., 2005; Cook, 1991; Pecora, 2005).

Recommendations

- Increase access to health insurance. Advocate for Chafee Medicaid waivers to enable emancipated young adults to obtain health insurance.
- Educate youth on addiction and substance abuse.

EDUCATION

CYAS results—secondary education

- At the time of the interview, 87.5% of interviewed Casey young adults had completed high school, via diploma or GED.
- Only 73.5% had a high school diploma, which means that 14% of the young adults completed high school with a GED.
- Nearly two in five young adults (38.5%) were enrolled in some type of educational program at the time of the interview.
- Of those enrolled, over two in five (41.2%) were enrolled at a community college, nearly three in ten (29.8%) were attending a four-year college, and a total of just over one in five were attending vocational or technical programs (10.2%) or high school or GED courses (10.2%).
- Many respondents (47.6%) had dropped out of either high school or postsecondary educational and training programs at some point.

For comparison

- The general population high school graduation rate is 85.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).
- Most foster care study findings show a range of 40% to 77% for high school completion (Mech & Fung, 1999; Blome, 1997; Cook, 1991; Casey Family Services, 1999; Courtney et al., 2001).

- The Northwest Alumni Study and the Casey National Study, which interviewed older alumni, found high school completion rates of 84.8% and 87.9%, respectively.
- Follow-up studies have found higher rates (6.3% to 28.5%) of young adults who completed a GED (Pecora et al., 2003, 2005; Courtney et al., 2005; Mech & Fung, 1999), compared to 5.1% for the general population (National Center on Education Statistics, 2003).

CYAS results—postsecondary education

- Nearly one in ten (9.1%) young adults in the CYAS had completed a vocational or technical degree or certificate, while fewer (3.3%) had earned an associate's degree.
- Over two in five (42.9%) participants had completed some college at the time of the interview.
- Few young adults had completed postsecondary education. Of 22-year-olds, 3.2% had completed a bachelor's degree, while 11.8% of the 25-year-olds had done so.

For comparison

- Research has found that many former foster youth enroll in and complete some postsecondary education; study findings range widely from 25% to 73% (Alexander & Huberty, 1993; Brandford & English, 2004; Casey Family Services, 1999; Cook, 1991; Mech & Fung, 1999).
- Postsecondary education completion rates are very low in most studies, ranging from 1.8% to 7.7% (Pecora et al., 2003, 2005; Cook, 1991; Festinger, 1983; Frost & Jurich, 1983).
- The U.S. Census has data that show that in the general population, 11.5% of 20- to 24-year-olds had completed a bachelor's degree, while 28.0% of those 25 and older had a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Recommendations

- Work to ensure that youth complete their high school diploma.
 - Measure educational attainment several years after youth exit care.
 - Continue examination of their reasons for dropping out.
 - Continue and enhance educational support networks for youth in care.
 - Keep all avenues of postsecondary education open to youth.
-

EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCES

CYAS results

- About 4 in 5 young adults (82.7%) were in the workforce at the time of the interview (that is, they were not a homemaker, retired, permanently disabled, or a student).
- Of those who were eligible to work, nearly one in four (24.2%) were not working.
- Over half (55.6%) of young adults or someone in their households were receiving some kind of public assistance. Many were receiving medical assistance, such as Medicaid (38.9%), student financial aid (27.1%), food stamps (24.5%), WIC (19.4%), or public housing assistance (10.4%).
- Over one-third (36.2%) of the sample was living below the poverty line and over four in five (84.1%) had a household income below three times the poverty line, which is considered a living wage.

For comparison

- In many studies of former foster youth, less than half of the interviewed sample was employed at the time of interview (Courtney et al., 2005, Mech & Fung, 1999; Cook, 1994; Brandford & English, 2004).

- Many of these young adults were also living below the household poverty line (Pecora et al., 2003, 2005; Brandford & English, 2004) compared to their peers in the general population (18.2%; DeNavas-Walt et al., 2005).
- Emancipated young adults and their families are often dependent on public assistance, such as cash assistance, medical assistance, food stamps, or unemployment (Courtney et al., 2005; Brandford & English, 2004; Dworsky & Courtney, 2000; Mech & Fung, 1999).

Recommendations

- Examine why Casey young adults have lower employment rates compared to the general population. In particular, explore the relation between mental health problems, education, criminal behavior, and employment rates.
 - Identify strategies to prepare youth in care with job skills.
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RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

CYAS results

- About one in four (23.5%) respondents had ever been married, but only 18% were married at the time of the interview. The majority (63.9%) of young adults were single, while 15.3% were in a domestic partnership.
- Of those who had given birth to or fathered a child since leaving care (38.0%), one in four (26.0%) was unplanned.
- Most of the Casey young adults had some contact with their birth families (87.9%) at the time of the interview.

- According to a standardized scale that measures social support, the respondents were not lacking in social supports from family and friends at the time of the interview.

For comparison

- Some existing research on relationships and social support among former recipients of foster care shows that many young adults were in committed relationships after leaving care, whether it is marriage or a domestic partnership. (Studies range from about 20% to 40%.) (Alexander & Huberty, 1993; Festinger, 1983; Jones & Moses, 1984; Zimmerman, 1982).
- These studies also found high rates of divorce and separation among respondents (ranging from about 7% to 30%; Alexander & Huberty, 1993; Festinger, 1983; Zimmerman, 1982).
- Moreover, research has found that 30% to 60% of young adults who have left foster care had given birth to or fathered at least one child (Alexander & Huberty, 1993; Brandford & English, 2004; Courtney et al., 1998; Cook, 1991; Utah Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

Recommendation

- Investigate how to foster positive contact between young adults and their birth families.
- Test methods for prevention of early, unplanned parenthood.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

CYAS results

- About two in five participants (39.9%) were active volunteers in their community or church. A similar proportion participated in organized sports or ac-

tivities in their community (35.9%), but fewer were involved in political or activist groups (10.2%).

For comparison

- Over one-third (36%) of 15 to 25 year olds in the general population volunteer in their community, while 5% report participating in political or activist groups (Lopez et al., 2006).

CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

CYAS results

- Nearly one in three (32.2%) had been arrested since leaving foster care, and more than one in four (26.3%) had spent at least one night incarcerated. One in five (20.3%) respondents had been convicted of a crime.
- Of the interviewed sample, 1.4% was incarcerated. However, of the total located sample in 2006 (including those located but not interviewed),³ 7.0% were incarcerated and an additional four were pending criminal charges or were on probation.

For comparison

- Studies show that 30% to 40% of respondents have been arrested since they exited foster care, over one-fourth had spent at least one night in jail or a correctional facility, and over 15% had been convicted of a crime (Alexander & Huberty, 1993; Courtney et al, 2005; Barth, 1990).
- 3.2% of adults in the general population were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole in 2005 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

Recommendation

- Conduct further research on young adults who have been involved with the criminal justice system to improve prevention efforts.

³ These data were not available for 2004 and 2005.

Differences Among Samples

Chi-square tests were used to do simple bivariate comparisons between years; methodological limitations prevented more sophisticated analyses controlling for other variables. While most findings were consistent across the three years (2004-06), there were several outcomes in which there were statistically significant differences. (See Table 1.) For example, more respondents in the 2005 sample had been homeless than in 2004 and 2006 and many more respondents had been arrested and incarcerated in the 2006 sample than in previous years' samples. While there are many potential explanations for this variation, it is possible that with increased success in locating individuals, we were able to interview more of the young adults who were not doing as well in 2005 and 2006, compared to 2004.

Table 1. Outcomes with Statistically Significant Differences between Years^a

Outcome	2004 (%)	2005 (%)	2006 (%)	Total (%)
Received foster care services	94.0	87.7	96.3	92.5
Received guardianship services	14.4	21.6	9.1	15.3
Received transition services	39.6	47.9	58.3	48.1
Participated in developing a transition plan	57.8	60.9	53.7	57.6
Had a written plan for transition	49.8	51.5	42.1	48.1
Feels safe where she or he lives	95.1	93.1	88.7	92.5
Ever homeless since leaving care	17.3	26.1	15.5	19.8
Currently in school	47.4	36.0	30.9	38.5
Ever dropped out of school	41.5	44.6	58.4	47.6
Attained a vocational/technical degree	11.7	4.1	6.6	7.6
Attained an associate degree	2.0	2.9	5.4	3.3
Currently working	70.4	79.4	67.2	72.6
Looking for work	29.1	17.9	25.8	24.2
Receives Medical Assistance	39.8	42.6	33.3	38.9
Receives welfare or TANF	12.4	7.7	5.6	8.8
Receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI)	8.5	8.6	12.6	9.7
Receives student financial aid	33.0	24.5	23.1	27.1
Ever arrested since leaving care	25.1	31.4	41.2	32.2
Spent at least one night in jail or prison since leaving care	21.4	23.0	35.7	26.3
Sample size	198	193	166	557

^a Chi-square tests were used to do simple bivariate comparisons between years; methodological limitations prevented more sophisticated analyses controlling for other variables.

Conclusion

Overall, findings from the three years of the CYAS were similar to other foster care follow-up studies in most outcome domains; the Casey young adults reported high rates of homelessness, symptoms of mental health disorders, GED completion, dependence on public assistance, and involvement with the criminal justice system. In contrast, educational and employment outcomes, as well as health insurance coverage and drug use, were better than most studies, with the exception of the Northwest Alumni Study and the Casey National Study, both of which interviewed participants at an older age (average ages of 24 and 31, respectively). These findings emphasize the need to continue studying outcomes of young adults as they get older and have more opportunities to achieve successes in their lives.

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Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care. Established by UPS founder Jim Casey in 1966, the foundation provides direct services and promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy.

Casey collaborates with foster, kinship, and adoptive parents to provide safe, loving homes for youth in its direct care. The foundation also collaborates with counties, states, and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to improve services and outcomes for the more than 500,000 young people in out-of-home care across the United States.

Drawing on four decades of front-line work with families and alumni of foster care, Casey Family Programs develops tools, practices, and policies to nurture all youth in care and to help parents strengthen families at risk of needing foster care.

For more information, contact Casey Family Programs at info@casey.org or 1300 Dexter Avenue North, Floor 3, Seattle, WA 98109.

Visit our Web site at www.casey.org.

