



Improving Family Foster Care

Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study

Each year 800,000 children are served by the child welfare system, with over 500,000 in foster care on any given day. Yet few studies analyze how youth formerly in care (alumni) fare as adults or how to improve the lives of youth in care. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study seeks to fill that gap.

The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (NW Alumni Study) examined outcomes for 659 alumni who were placed in family foster care as children.¹ These alumni were all adults age 20 to 33 who had been placed in family foster care between 1988 and 1998. Each was served by one of these three agencies:

- Casey Family Programs
- The Oregon Department of Human Services, Division of Children, Adults, and Families
- The Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration, Division of Children and Family Services

The study reviewed case records for all 659 alumni and interviewed 479 of them between September

2000 and January 2002. The adjusted response rate was 75.7 percent.

Key Findings

Despite challenges that included child maltreatment and placement instability, many alumni were doing well in terms of educational achievement, personal income, or other major outcomes. The majority of alumni, however, faced significant challenges in the areas of mental health, education, and employment and finances.

Mental Health

Compared to the general population, a disproportionate number of alumni suffered from mental

health disorders. Within the 12 months prior to being interviewed, their diagnoses included:

- One or more disorders: 54.4 percent
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 25.2 percent (a rate nearly double that of U.S. war veterans)²
- Major depression: 20.1 percent
- Social phobia: 17.1 percent

Education

Alumni completed high school (via diploma or GED credential) at rates similar to the general population. They used GED programs to complete high school at six times the rate of the general population, however. Other findings included:

- Seven or more school changes from elementary through high school: 65.0 percent
- Completed high school (via a diploma or GED credential): 84.8 percent
- Obtained a GED credential: 28.5 percent
- Received some education beyond high school: 42.7 percent
- Completed any degree/certificate beyond high school: 20.6 percent
- Completed a vocational degree: 16.1 percent (25 years and older: 21.9 percent)
- Completed a bachelor's degree: 1.8 percent (25 years and older: 2.7 percent)

Employment and Finances

Alumni experienced difficult employment and financial situations. Their employment rate was

lower than that of the general population, and they lacked health insurance at almost twice the rate of the general population (age 18 to 44).

Other findings included:

- Homeless for one day or more after age 18: 22.2 percent
- Employed full- or part-time (among those eligible to work): 80.1 percent
- Currently receiving cash public assistance: 16.8 percent
- Had household incomes at or below poverty level: 33.2 percent
- Had no health insurance: 33.0 percent

Conclusion

The NW Alumni Study found that some youth placed in foster care benefited from the protection, emotional care, and services they received. However, many did not. Service delivery systems were unable to help alumni complete vocational training or college or to secure and sustain jobs that pay a living wage with health insurance.

Using statistical simulations, certain program areas were identified that, when optimized, can improve alumni outcomes. These prediction simulations would be bolstered by additional research, including rigorous field trials.

Apart from these research efforts, many program reforms could be made now. These are described in the recommendations section. Combining the statistical simulations with the recommendations would have a powerful effect on youth outcomes.

Recommendations

The NW Alumni Study technical report includes several recommendations for how agencies and communities can improve outcomes for youth currently in care:

Mental Health Recommendations

- Increase youth and alumni access to evidence-based medical and mental health treatment
- Maintain placement stability, which appears to have a large positive effect on adult mental health
- Increase education services and experiences

Education Recommendations

- Encourage and support youth to pursue a high school diploma and to complete high school by age 18 or 19
- Encourage, prepare, and support youth for college and/or vocational school
- Minimize school placement change
- Provide concrete resources to youth as they leave care (independent living skills, driver's license, etc.)

Employment and Finances Recommendations

- Overhaul independent living preparation
- Strengthen housing programs and other supports to prevent homelessness after leaving care
- Minimize placement change (so that youth can develop better social support networks)

- Optimize education services and experiences
- Provide youth exiting care with concrete resources (e.g., basic household supplies, driver's license, \$250 in cash)

Testimonial

“This really validates many things that many of us had speculated. We will use it [the NW Alumni Study] as a guide to where we're going to put our time, energy and resources.”

—Foster care program manager
Oregon

¹ Abstracted from Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A.C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K.E. (2005). *Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. Available at www.casey.org.

² Kulka, R.A., Fairbank, J.A. Jordan, K., & Weiss, D. (1990). *Trauma and the Vietnam War generation: Report of findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*. New York: Brunner/Mazel; and Hoge, C.W., Castro, C.A., Messer, S.C., McGurk, D., Cotting, D.I., & Koffman, R.L. (2004). Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health problems, and barriers to care. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 351 (1) 13–22.

To request a hard copy or to download the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, please visit www.casey.org/ToolsAndResources. Casey Family Programs' Research Services conducts a variety of alumni follow-up and other evaluation studies. Visit our Web site for additional research information, including the Casey National Alumni Study.

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