

ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF FOSTER CARE

Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study¹

Over 800,000 children received foster care services in the United States during fiscal year 2002. At the end of the year, 534,000 youth were still in care.² Nearly half of the children placed in foster care will spend one year or more in out-of-home placement.³ Few studies have focused on the results of foster care services in terms of how youth fare after leaving care.

Preliminary results from the Casey National Alumni Study, a collaboration among researchers from several universities and organizations,⁴ social workers, foster care alumni, and foster parents, are now available. This report describes the early life experiences, educational progress, and success as adults of more than a thousand Casey Family Programs foster care alumni who were served in 23 communities across the country between 1966 and 1998. (To download a copy of the report, please visit <http://www.casey.org>.)



KEY FINDINGS

Stability

The number of placement changes dropped substantially after youth were placed with Casey foster families.

- Number of placements per year before Casey: 2.6
- Number of placements per year during care with Casey: 1.0

Education

High school graduation rates for Casey alumni exceeded graduation rates among the general population and foster care alumni in other studies.⁵ College attendance and BA completion rates were lower than the general population,⁶ but may reflect the relatively large number of Casey alumni still in school.

- Casey alumni high school graduation rate: 88%
- Casey alumni that attended college: 44%
- Casey alumni with BA degree or higher: 11%
- Casey alumni still in school: 16%

Educational achievement was similar for alumni of color, indicating that concerted efforts by agency staff, foster parents and youth can overcome institutional racism, the effects of racial disproportionality, and other educational challenges.⁷

- Alumni of color fared as well as Caucasian alumni

Homelessness

About one in five alumni were homeless for one or more nights within a year after leaving foster care. However, the percent has decreased over the past three decades.

- Homelessness rate in the 1970's: 29%
- Homelessness rate in the 1980's: 25%
- Homelessness rate in the 1990's: 19%

Employment

Employment rates were slightly lower than the general population, but a greater difference in income was observed.

- Casey alumni individual income: \$16,500 (26% lower than the general population income of \$22,199)
- Casey alumni median household income: \$27,500 (35% lower than the general population income of \$42,148)

WHAT WORKS?

The following factors were found to be some of the major predictors associated with adult success:

- completion of high school while youth were in care
- life skills/independent living training
- participation in clubs or organizations while in care
- access to post-secondary educational opportunities such as college or vocational training

Additional analyses associated with high school completion of foster youth suggested:

- the value of delaying a child's first placement in the child welfare system (i.e., better use of primary prevention and family support)
- reducing placement disruptions
- helping youth gain employment experience while in care
- providing independent living training
- promoting a positive relationship between the child and the foster parents
- minimizing criminal behavior

REFERENCES

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² See <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/publications/afcars.htm>

³ See the length of stay statistics for children leaving care in the AFCARS report for September 30, 2001: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/report8.htm>

⁴ University collaborators included Harvard University, and the Universities of Michigan and Washington. Organizational collaborators included Casey Family Programs and the state child welfare agencies from Oregon and Washington.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. (2003). See <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). See <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

⁷ See Pecora et al., (2003), pp. 34-35.