

Abstract

Extended foster care systems have been implemented in half of the U.S. states to aid teens in a healthier transition into adulthood. The proposed study aims to examine the potential benefits these extended programs produce. A quasi-experimental approach will be utilized to examine two groups of 25 participants from an urban area -- those who aged-out at eighteen and those who choose to continue in the extended foster care programs. Participants will be interviewed at age 18, 21, and 25 to gain insight on resources provided and their overall status regarding jobs, education, housing, and arrest record. Results from these three interviews will be compared between the two groups to assess the differences. It is expected that the teenagers enrolled in the extended foster care programs will be provided the necessary resources to be more successful adults compared to those who aged out of the system at age 18.

Introduction

According to the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Health, there are an estimated 400,000 children in the foster care system at any given time in the U.S. (2020). In many states, when these children reach the age of eighteen, they are forced to age out of the system. To help combat this issue, extended foster care programs have been implemented in 26 of the U.S. states to provide additional support for teenagers in the system as they transition into adulthood. According to Mendes and Rogers (2020), these extended programs "are viewed as providing young people with a more normative transition process based on developmental capacity, rather than chronological age" (p. 1515). The present study will utilize research to further examine the resources these programs provide and how they might affect the overall status of the adult lives of former foster youth.

To get an insight on how extended foster care programs correlate with educational attainment, Courtney and Hook (2016) conducted a study by collecting data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth. This evaluation included five waves of data representing three states: Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. At the time of the study, Illinois courts allowed foster children to stay in foster care until they were 21 while Iowa and Wisconsin rarely let the foster youth stay until their 19th birthday. After analyzing the data, Courtney and Hook found that "allowing youth to remain in foster care to age 21 increases the likelihood that they will continue their education" (2016, p. 130). Additionally, the study found that "each additional year in care is associated with a 46% increase in the estimated odds that former foster youth will progress to the next level of educational attainment by the age of 26" (Courtney & Hook, 2016, p. 126). In comparison to Iowa and Wisconsin former foster youth, those from Illinois continued to experience higher levels of educational attainment exhibiting the clear benefits of extended foster care on future education levels.

Dworsky et al. (2013) utilized the same Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth data to collect information on homelessness rates of former foster youth. They specifically wanted to compare the data from the youth that aged out at eighteen and the youth that continued in extended foster care programs. Of the 624 participants that completed the multiple phases of the study, researchers found that 36% of them had been homeless at least once before the age of 26 and after transitioning out of foster care. A few risk factors that increased the likelihood of homelessness were identified and they are as followed: "running away while in foster care, greater placement instability, being male, a history of being physically abused, engaging in more delinquent behaviors, and having symptoms of a mental health disorder" (Dworsky et al., 2013, p. 319). By becoming aware of these results, Dworsky et al. suggested that teenagers with more support from child welfare agencies after the age of eighteen would be better off (2013).

In addition to educational attainment and homelessness rates, researchers were also curious about how extended foster care programs impacted rates of arrest. A study conducted by Lee et al. (2014) scrutinized the prevalence of arrests for former foster youth. By employing the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth data, Lee et al. concluded that "being out of care in the first year of the study, when participants were ages 18-19, was consistently associated with higher risk of arrest for both men and women" (2014, p. 38). This suggests that by providing just one year of extra foster care may lessen the risk of arrest significantly and therefore improve their adult life.

Despite the research supporting increased educational attainment, and decreased homelessness numbers and arrest rates produced from extended foster care programs, the overall financial cost of extending foster care proves to be a concern for some. According to Barth et al., "on average, for the long-term foster care of a child, North Carolina spent \$23 per day, \$8,507 per year, and \$41,299 in total cost" (2006, p. 140). The overall costs of implementing these programs is a legitimate concern; however, the research outlining the risks of aging out of the foster care system at 18 provides enough evidence to support the need of utilizing more federal spending towards developing extended foster care programs.

The current study aims to build off previous research to gain insight on the differences between aging out of foster care at eighteen or continuing on to extended foster care programs for a couple more years.

Specifically, the study will focus on gaining information about what resources each group of teenagers are provided with and how these resources have affected their transition into early adulthood.

The number of children in foster care in the U.S.:



Predicted Results

This study will use an independent samples t-test to test the two hypotheses that foster youth who continue in extended foster care programs will receive more support and have a better life trajectory than the foster youth that age out at 18. This statistical analysis will allow us to look for differences between our two levels of the independent variable. It is expected that there will be a significant difference in resources provided and life trajectory between the two groups of participants.

The difference in the groups may be seen because the extended foster care program group might receive more resources and therefore have a better life trajectory than the group who aged out of the system at 18. These findings would support both hypothesis one and two. The results of the study could also support the null hypothesis and show that there are no significant differences between the two groups.



Methods

Participants

The sample for this proposed study will include 50 participants who will be divided into two groups (25 participants in each): one group who aged out of foster care at 18 and one group who continued on to extended foster care programs. Participants will be foster children who just turned 18 years old and are given the choice to either age out of the system or stay in extended care. These participants would be from Boston, Massachusetts -- an urban and diverse area of the United States where extended foster care has been implemented until age 21 -- and they would be recruited through their caseworkers. Participants would be interviewed at three different points of their lives: age 18, 21, and 25. They will receive \$50 per interview that they complete, or \$150 in total if they complete all three interviews.

Materials

The primary outcome measures are the resources that former foster youth are provided after turning 18. The secondary outcome measures are how the resources provided affected the transition into adulthood for former foster youth.

Resources Provided

To assess resources that the participants in the two groups are provided, interviewers will ask questions regarding governmental help, job search programs, and social support. Participants will rate each of these categories on a scale from 1-5 where 1 is no support and 5 is exceptional support.

Overall Life Trajectory

To assess the overall life trajectory of the participants in the two groups, interviewers will ask questions regarding life satisfaction and hopefulness for the future. Participants will rate each of these categories on a scale from 1-5 where 1 is the worst life trajectory and 5 is the best.

Procedure

Potential participants will be invited to participate in this study by their caseworkers at their foster care agency. After deciding to take part in the study, participants will be divided into two groups -- aging out of the system at 18 or staying in the extended programs. This quasi-experimental study allows the participants to pick which group they will be in. At three stages of their lives, participants in each group will be asked a series of interview questions regarding the resources they are provided and how their life is going overall. Scores from these interview questions regarding resources provided will be added up and averaged for each interview and a score will be given for each time period.

When being assessed for overall life trajectory, participants will be asked questions like "how satisfied are you with your life?" and "how hopeful are you for the future?". Scores from the life trajectory questions will also be added up and averaged for each interview and a score will be given for each time period.

Discussion

If the findings of the proposed study support our two hypotheses, results would show that former foster youth who choose to stay in the extended foster care programs are provided with more resources that lead them into a more positive adult life. With this information, the remaining 24 states should consider implementing these programs. By gaining access to more resources, former foster youth are given a better chance of succeeding while transitioning into adulthood. With these extended programs in place across the country, Courtney and Hook (2016) project that former foster youth will have access to a higher level of education leading to more job opportunities. The predicted results of the study involving Boston former foster youth would indicate this increase in educational attainment as well. Along with increasing the likelihood of greater educational attainment, the predicted results of our study would also lead to a predicted decrease in homelessness numbers because of the additional resources these former foster youth are receiving (Dworsky et al., 2013). The additional resources and social support could also lead to a decrease in the rate of homelessness, if the results of the proposed study yield what they are expected to (Lee et al., 2014). Despite the concerns of the overall costs of implementing these programs, the results that we predict from this study would outweigh the potential cost concerns. By providing additional resources and support to foster youth who have just turned 18, a healthier and smoother transition into adulthood may be achieved.

References

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