TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD
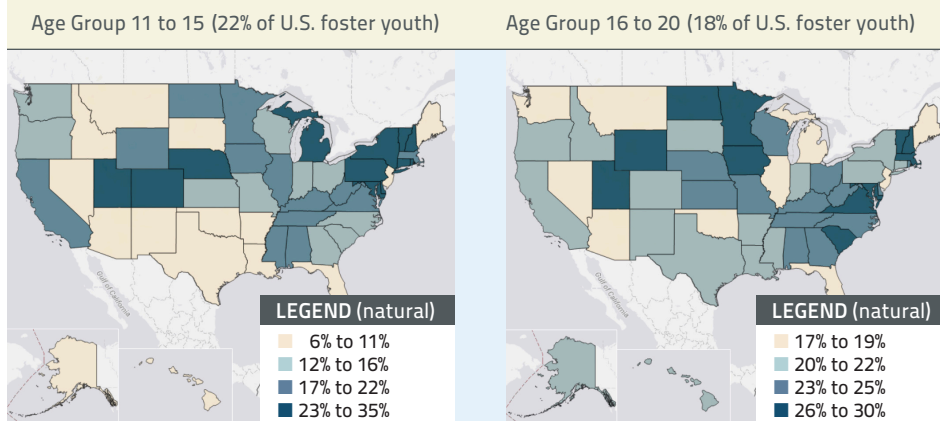### for Foster Care and Justice System-Involved Youth

Adolescents, particularly those in urban areas, face many challenges in the transition to adulthood. More than half of youth in urban high schools fail to graduate high school,[1] and many young adults are neither in school nor working during early adulthood.[2,3] Researchers have proposed that the period from 18 to 25 is a particularly important time for developing personal identity, calling this time "emerging adulthood".[4] As youth transition to adulthood, they must shift somewhat from family life and develop maturity and key life skills, a time of opportunity but also of risk.[4] Those without higher education and those without a high school degree struggle to attain economic self sufficiency.[3]

For those involved in the foster care and juvenile justice system, the transition to adulthood is even more challenging. In the United States, 18% of children in foster care in 2013 were between 16 and 20 years old, and 22% are between 11 and 15 (Figure 1).[5] One in ten children involved in foster care will "age out" (exit the system) without returning to their family of origin or being adopted.[6]

In 2011, there were 61,423 youth confined in juvenile detention facilities in the United States.[5] An even larger number of young people are involved with the juvenile justice system while living in their communities. In Cuyahoga County in 2010, 7,128 youth were involved with the juvenile delinquency system, a rate of 51.4 per 1,000 youth.[7]

Some youth will be involved with both the foster care and juvenile justice system ("dual-system involvement"). In Cuyahoga County, approximately 30% of youth who entered foster care system were between 13 and 17. Youth who first encounter child welfare systems later in childhood/adolescence are more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system.[8–10] Researchers at the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development following Cuyahoga County children born between 1990 and 1995 found that 30% of those placed in foster care for the first time after age 9 had a juvenile delinquency filing.[11] This rate is much higher than two comparison cities, Chicago (12%) and New York (17%).[12] Dual-system involved youth face major challenges in transitioning to adulthood, specifically in their ability to successfully graduate high school, find employment, secure stable housing, and prevent future involvement with the criminal justice system. Research from New York City found in the six years following discharge, dual-system involved youth were more likely to use cash assistance, SNAP, Medicaid, and homeless shelters and to have jail stays, compared to youth involved with only one system.[13] The cumulative cost of services used after discharge was also higher for dually involved youth ($65,424) than for those involved in only the juvenile justice system ($47,854) or the foster care system ($46,670).[13] ∎

FIGURE 1. CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE BY AGE GROUP - 2013

Age Group 11 to 15 (22% of U.S. foster youth)

Age Group 16 to 20 (18% of U.S. foster youth)

LEGEND (natural)
- 6% to 11%
- 12% to 16%
- 17% to 22%
- 23% to 35%

LEGEND (natural)
- 17% to 19%
- 20% to 22%
- 23% to 25%
- 26% to 30%

Source: **National KIDS COUNT** KIDS COUNT Data Center, datacenter.kidscount.org.
A project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

TABLE 1: SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT BY GENDER, RACE AND DISABILITY STATUS

	No System Involvement	Foster Care Only	Juvenile Justice Only	Dually Involved
All	75.8%	1.7%	20.8%	1.7%
Gender				
Female	83.7%	2.2%	12.7%	1.4%
Male	68.2%	1.2%	28.5%	2.1%
Race/Ethnicity				
African-American	72.4%	1.8%	23.8%	2.0%
Hispanic	85.3%	0.5%	13.9%	0.3%
White	83.8%	2.2%	12.7%	1.3%
Other	99.1%	0%	0.9%	0%
Disability				
No	76.9%	1.6%	20.0%	1.5%
Yes	65.6%	3.0%	26.6%	3.8%

RESEARCH Findings

In order to better understand the outcomes of dual system-involved youth, Claudia Coulton, PhD and David Crampton, PhD of the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University followed a sample of students that attended 9th grade in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) through age 21 and determined the incidence of foster care and juvenile justice system involvement. They also examined their patterns of high school attendance, and rates of homelessness and local incarceration.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 10,086 youth were involved in the study. 51.0% were male and 49.0% female. The sample was 73.1% African American, 15.7% White, 10.1% Hispanic and 1.1% other race/ethnicity. 10.0% of the students studied had a disability.

While the majority of students were involved with neither system (75.8%), 1 in 4 students were involved in one or both systems. More specifically, as noted in Table 1, 20.8% of youth were involved in the juvenile justice system between 9th grade and age 18, 1.7% involved in the foster care system after 9th grade, and 1.7% involved in both systems during these periods.

EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND STABILITY

The researchers found that system involved youth were more likely to be chronically absent, missing more than 10% of the days where they were enrolled. 79.5% of juvenile justice involved youth were chronically absent, compared to 52.9% of youth with no system involvement. System involved youth were also less likely to stay in CMSD for all 4 years after enrollment in the 9th grade. 23.4% of foster care only youth, 22.4% of dually involved youth, and 33.4% of juvenile justice only youth stayed all four years in CMSD, compared to more than half of non-system involved youth.

HOMELESSNESS OUTCOMES

Overall 14.4% of dual-involved youth and 9.1% of foster care involved youth used homelessness services. Youth who are involved in foster care during high school have 4.4 times higher expected days of using homeless services. Juvenile justice involved youth had 1.9 more expected days of homeless services. Females and African American youth are at a higher risk of homelessness than non-Hispanic white youth and youth with disabilities. It should be noted that these numbers only include those who access formal homeless services, not those living with friends in unstable housing or on the street.

ADULT JAIL ADMISSION OUTCOMES

Dually involved (33.3%) and juvenile justice involved (36.3%) youth had the highest rates of admissions to the Cuyahoga County jail between ages 18 and 21. Youth who had been in the foster care system (15.4%) also had a significantly higher rate of jail admissions than youth who were not system involved (5.8%) Youth who had been involved with the juvenile justice system spent 7.4 more expected days in jail than youth who were not system involved. Similarly, youth who were in the foster care system had 1.6 greater expected days in jail. African-American youth, males, and youth with a disability were at higher risk for jail than females and non-Hispanic white youth.

For those who were able to stay in CMSD throughout their high school years, the impact of system involvement on future homelessness and jail time was reduced, suggesting that school stability can be an important factor in successfully transitioning to adulthood. ∎

POLICY & PRACTICE Implications

As this research demonstrates, system involvement during adolescence has a profound impact on several adverse events in early adulthood. The beginning of high school is also a critical opportunity for effective interventions for youth to help improve adult outcomes. As many youth do not remain within the same district for all 4 years, these interventions should follow youth through relocation within and across school districts, in partnership with other services in the community. Providing comprehensive employment, educational and social support to youth who have not graduated high school provides increased earnings into early adulthood.[14]

In particular, youth aging out of the foster care system require key supports and life skills, such as maintaining healthy peer relationships, job skills, and career development.[15] In Ohio, 1,000 youth age out of the foster care system every year.[16] Prior to 2008, foster youth ceased to receive federal support at age 18. In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act began providing federal matching funds for states to continue to provide support to foster youth through age 21.[16] Ohio House Bill 50 is currently being considered to extend support to Ohio foster youth through age 21. If approved, foster youth who are currently completing secondary education, enrolled in higher education or in a vocational school, or employed for 80 hours per month (or unable to do any of these activities due to disability) would be provided supportive services, including housing, case management and extended adoption assistance for up to an additional

three years. These supports are equal to an estimated $9 million dollars over 5 years in increased educational achievement, support for young parents and intervention for troubled youth.[16]

Adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system also have specific challenges related to transitioning into adulthood. Those involved in the juvenile justice system during adolescence are at a high risk of reoffending as adults, failing to graduate high school, and to be unemployed.[17] Programs are needed to support youth transitioning out of the juvenile justice system and through early adulthood. Keeping youth involved in the juvenile justice system connected to their families and their communities is a key piece of helping them transition effectively. Juvenile justice diversion strategies such as the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative and Ohio's Targeted and Competitive RECLAIM initiatives have shifted youth in the juvenile justice system from correctional facilities into evidence-based community programs.[18, 19] This policy change was based on consistent findings that keeping youth in their communities reduces risk of reoffending.[19–21] These community programs also facilitate family visitation and engagement with the local community.[19] Providing career training and mental health and substance abuse treatment are also important in assisting youth to successfully transition out of the juvenile justice system and into adulthood.[22]

Keeping adolescents out of the juvenile justice and foster care systems when feasible is key to successful adult

outcomes for at risk youth. Alternative response or differential response systems help to keep children in low-risk homes out of foster care by providing support to families through community services.[23] Twenty states, including Ohio, have state-wide differential response programs, with many others having regional or planned programs.[24] Research suggests that alternative response programs do not compromise child safety and reduce unnecessary out-of-home placements.[24] Families in alternative response programs were also more likely to receive concrete supports and services, such as assistance for housing costs and childcare, than families in traditional investigative response.[24] For youth who are in foster care, programs that encourage permanent placement and adoption rather than aging out of the system are important to long term success.[25]

Innovative programs in northeast Ohio are working to address the needs of children in both systems and improving their future outcomes. For example, in Cuyahoga County, the YWCA "A Place 4 Me" program coordinates and plans local responses to reduce youth homelessness. Improving school stability may also assist in keeping kids connected to a local community. The Cleveland Housing Network's Family Stability Initiative assists CMSD families facing eviction or foreclosure to maintain school stability by providing housing stability services, including case management, housing counseling and financial education.

Youth aging out of the foster care system require key supports and life skills, such as maintaining healthy peer relationships, job skills, and career development.

policy & practice *continued* **>**

Linking system-involved youth to positive youth development programs, such as afterschool programs and summer programs, may also play an important role in promoting long term positive outcomes. These programs assist youth in developing important internal and external assets necessary for the successful transition to adulthood.[26] Youth in effective positive youth development programs show improvement in self-control, problem solving, self-efficacy and commitment to schooling.[27]

FUTURE RESEARCH

As knowledge about the specific risks for system involved youth evolves, more research is needed to better determine points for intervention. Greater information is needed about foster care involvement before entry into 9th grade and future risk of involvement with the juvenile justice system. Additionally, pathways from foster care into the juvenile justice system as well as from the juvenile justice system into foster care should be further examined. Future research should also explore the connections between system involvement during adolescence and future employment, educational prospects and financial security. More research is needed to find and describe homelessness among youth who are not accessing formal surveys, such as the work by Schubert Center Faculty Associate Rob Fischer on the Cuyahoga County Youth Count Initiative. Finally, to best describe potentially successful interventions, greater attention is needed on those dually-involved youth who have positive outcomes to better identify what factors promote resilience and success in the transition to adulthood. ■

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