A transitional housing program for older foster youth: How do youth fare after exiting?

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A R T I C L E   I N F O 

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study is an outcome evaluation of Bay Area Youth Center's Real Alternatives for Adolescents (RAFA) transitional housing program in Hayward, California. 

Methods: This study examined a sample of 55 youth ages 16 to 21 who lived in the RAFA transitional program between 2007 and 2015. 

Results: About 96% were in residing in stable housing at follow up, there were low rates of parenting before age 22 (41% of females and 16% of males) when compared with other similar studies, and 86% were employed earning, on average, $15.69 per hour at follow-up. Also, there were lower rates of receipt of SSI, food stamps and TANF income support when compared to foster youth in other studies. 

Conclusions: In vivo housing experiences in transitional housing programs can lead to successful outcomes for foster youth as they move to adulthood.

1. Introduction

Nationwide about 23,000 youth exit foster care because they reach adulthood (Valentine et al., 2015) and in California alone, approximately 4300 exit the foster care system annually at the age of 21 (Webster et al., 2017). The child welfare practice and research communities know well that former foster care youth struggle with the transition to adulthood and independence. In fact, youth aging out of care face additional challenges compared with youth who have grown up in long-lasting, consistent family settings (Trejos-Castillo et al., 2015, p. 54). 

A growing body of research links “aging out” of foster care with housing problems in the transition to adulthood (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). In addition to marginal housing, little connection to parenting figures, lack of savings, under or unemployment, low of educational attainment, early parenting, receipt of public assistance, and behavioral health problems are all reasons why youth may be challenged with the transition. Yet, when foster youth turn 18—or, in some states, 21—they lose access to the housing, financial, educational, and social supports provided through the child welfare system (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). Several factors—including an evolving understanding of normative development, growing knowledge about the diverse needs of foster youth, and changing views of the state’s role and responsibilities as parent when children are removed from home—are leading policymakers to reassess how to support young people transitioning from foster care to independence (Peters et al., 2009, p. 1)

States are now focused on helping older foster youth move to independence by offering funding for transitional housing, which can include additional services such as independent living skills training, case management, mental health therapy, employment preparation, and educational support. Most states now offer funding for transitional housing providers to house foster youth ages 18 to 21, and in some cases up to age 25, so they may age out of the foster care system with increased life skills, money saved, high school diploma/earned college credits, and some employment experience or job skills. And, the hope is that these positive outcomes continue over time for these young people.

1.1. Purpose of the study

This study examines supportive transitional housing for older foster youth as a possible preventative intervention against future homelessness, unemployment, lack of educational attainment, receipt of public assistance, and early parenting. Although there is a plethora of research on the outcomes of the general population of youth leaving foster care, the research on transitional living programs includes few rigorous evaluations, most of which do not find positive results (Valentine et al., 2015, p. 3). Also, there has been little research examining outcomes of transitional housing programs offering “in vivo” experiences, to prevent future negative outcomes for former foster youth. In vivo housing experiences are those where youth are living in...
actual apartments versus foster homes or congregate care.

This study is a descriptive evaluation exploring the outcomes of current, older foster youth served by a supportive housing program in the San Francisco Bay Area. Below are the research questions, which were extrapolated from the seminal Midwest studies by Chapin Hall (see Courtney et al., 2011):

- What percentage of youth were in stable housing and/or employed at follow-up?
- What percentage of youth were parents at follow-up?
- What was the educational attainment of youth at follow-up?
- What was the percentage of youth who had received public assistance at follow-up?
- What is the perspective of the youth in terms of the helpfulness of RAFA’s services?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Outcomes for foster youth aging out

Studies over the last twenty years have shown that former foster youth are challenged with most aspects of early adulthood: maintaining stable housing, obtaining and keeping employment, staying enrolled in school, and having a stable romantic relationship (see Courtney et al., 2005; Jonson-Reid and Barth, 2000; Needell et al., 2002). These outcomes have often been examined at point-in-time at exit, but some studies have followed youth longitudinally, up to age 26 (see Courtney et al., 2011).

Recently there has been a fundamental shift toward greater federal responsibility for supporting foster youth during the transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2016, p. 10). For a few decades, federal policy was focused on preparing foster youth with training programs that taught independent living skills, even though there was little evidence demonstrating benefit of these programs (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). Most counties first provided Independent Living Skills services under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (which was the first federal law that offered $45 million in funding, and actual disbursement first occurring in 1987) to support state and county delivery of independent living skills services. However, it was generally unknown how effective those services were at preparing foster youth for independent living and no comprehensive outcome studies were conducted.

After fifteen years of gradual ILSP expansion, the Foster Care Independence Act (Public Law 16-169), was passed and renamed the program the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (Sommer, 2013, p. 5). The Chaffee Act increased the level of federal funding to $140 million a year, further expanded ILSP eligibility to all youth in foster care (not just those eligible for federally-funded welfare), and provided a state option to provide ILSP services to all youth likely to remain in care until age 21, thereby removing the minimum age requirement (Foster and Gifford, 2005). But, even with the ILSP expansion, there remained dismal outcomes for youth aging out of foster care at age 18 – in all aspects of the transition to adulthood.

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed in 2008 (H.R. 6893/P.L. 110–351) and had one significant provision that allowed states to receive federal reimbursement for costs associated with supporting foster youth in care up to age 21. Illinois was the first state in the nation to let youth to remain in care until age 21, and between 2008 and 2017 twenty-four other states, and the District of Columbia, have passed similar legislation. California is arguably the most important early adopter of the new policy (called Assembly Bill 12 or AB 12) as it has the largest state foster care population in the country, lending national significance to what happens in California’s child welfare system (Fowler et al., 2017, p.10).

Youth who choose to stay in foster care until age 21 in California are called Non-Minor Dependents (NMDs).

Studies have found that outcomes for foster youth have been shown to improve if they are able to stay in care until age 21 (see Courtney et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2009). The seminal Midwest study found that former foster youth from Illinois, where young people could remain in care until their 21st birthday, were twice as likely to have ever attended college and more than twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college by age 21 compared with former foster youth from Iowa and Wisconsin, where remaining in care beyond 18 was not an option (Courtney et al., 2007). And, Courtney et al. (2016) found that when comparing California youth who stayed in care until age 21 to those who chose not to remain in care, those in care were less likely to be homeless.

2.2. History of housing for foster youth

Policymakers fear abrupt disruption of services at age 18 combined with chaotic family environments, in the face of developmentally normative experimentation, leave many foster youth highly vulnerable to homelessness (Fowler et al., 2017, p. 27). In most states there are now a variety of housing options available for older youth in foster care, ages 16 to 21. Over the last fifteen years there have been various funding streams to pay for housing options for older foster care youth besides traditional foster homes, group homes and kinship placements. After examining 60 different state and local programs providing housing or housing assistance for older foster care youth, Dworsky and Dion (2014) were able to categorize the main types of housing programs into one of three broad groups: (1) programs that provide single-site housing and a high level of supervision and support, (2) programs that provide scattered-site housing or rental assistance and a low level of supervision, and (3) programs that provide more than one type of housing with different levels of supervision (p.1). There is also housing support for former foster care youth through HUD’s Family Unification Program (FUP), and this housing is usually provided via local Public Housing Authorities.

In California, THPP is a transitional housing placement opportunity for foster youth and youth on probation who are at least 16 and not more than 18, who are currently in the child welfare system (Childsworld, 2010). The program’s goal is to provide a safe living environment so youth can practice the skills necessary to live on their own upon leaving the foster care support system. The program provides supervised transitional living housing and supportive services based on a youth’s Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP). Each TILP is developed by the foster youth and other supportive persons, and details the youth’s goals and objectives while working toward self-sufficiency.

A transitional housing placement provider that provides a THPP program is licensed under the California Health and Safety Code Sections 1502(a)(1),1503.5(a) and 1559.110. THPPs are funded with federal, state, and county funds. Participants may live alone or, with departmental approval, with roommates in apartments and single family dwellings or in a host family model. The youth are also supported by THPP contracted agency staff, county social workers, and Independent Living Skills Coordinators (Childsworld, 2010).

THP-Plus (THP + FC) Foster Care is another California transitional housing option for older foster care youth that are NMDs. THP + FC is a licensed placement for youth, ages 18–20 who are participating in extended foster care made available by AB 12. THP + FC providers offer housing and comprehensive supportive services (e.g., case management, educational support, employment preparation, counseling, etc.) until the youth’s 21st birthday. THP + FC providers are certified by public county departments of social services agencies and licensed as Transitional Housing Placement Providers by the Community Care Licensing (CCL) Division of the California Department of Social Services. In 2017 there were 137 housing providers in 48 counties (out of 58) throughout California that served 1661 youth in THP + FC housing (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2017).
There are hundreds of transitional living programs to assist these young people nationwide, yet there is little empirical information about the effectiveness of these programs. A recent seminal study was conducted by Valentine et al. (2015) which examined outcomes of the Youth Villages transitional housing program for foster youth, and used a randomized assignment study design. Program participants received intensive case management services, support, and counseling (Valentine et al., 2015, p. ES-4), while the control group received no intervention besides contact with other non-profit providers or their child welfare worker. The program group did significantly better than the randomized control group in the areas of: 1) earnings from formal work, 2) housing stability, 3) economic well-being, 4) mental health outcomes and 5) not being in a violent partner relationship (Valentine et al., 2015). But, it did not improve outcomes in the area of education, criminal involvement, or social support (p. iii). This study was only conducted one-year after participants entered the program.

This current study attempts to address the lack of research examining outcomes of transitional living programs for older foster youth. Although there are hundreds of programs across the country, most have not examined the long-term outcomes of youth who resided in those programs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Program description

In 2003, Bay Area Youth Centers (BAYC) launched the Real Alternatives for Adolescents (RAFA) transitional housing program to address the poor outcomes for youth who were exiting the child welfare and juvenile justice group homes systems. Surmising that the poor outcomes were related to the lack of “in vivo” experience living independently before exiting care, BAYC sought to improve outcomes for youth by offering them the opportunity to experience independent living prior to their transition out of the foster care and probation systems. The RAFA program provides an opportunity for youth in care who are 16 to 20 years old, to develop the independent living skills that will be required of them as adults.

Youth in RAFA live independently in apartments in Hayward, California and regular support is provided by a team of staff. Staff support youth with learning and practicing independent living skills (including budgeting, grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and accessing public transportation and assistance), as well as achieving educational and employment goals. Participants receive food stamps each month and do not pay rent. RAFA participants must go to school regularly, attend county ILSP services, be present at weekly community meetings and roommate mediations, and work or volunteer at least ten hours per week.

Weekly clinical case management, mental health, and therapeutic group services are also provided. Master’s level case managers and clinicians support the youth with their goals. The aim of the program is to reduce homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system and to increase achievement in education, employment and overall independent living skills. Crisis and emergency support is available to the youth 24 h per day, seven days per week. The program also provides services to foster youth ages 16 to 20 years who have one child or are at least six months pregnant.

RAFA was the first Transitional Housing Placement Program in Northern California and grew from 5 participants to 25 participants between 2003 and 2011. In 2012, when California extended foster care to youth up to age 21, RAFA expanded to its current capacity of 50 youth, with at least six months pregnant.

3.2. Research aims

The researchers developed a study instrument that gathered relevant data related to outcome variables such as housing, parenting, receipt of public assistance, employment and educational attainment. This study uses a cohort, cross-sectional design and quantitative methods to explore the following research questions:

- What percentage of youth experienced the following at follow up?
- Stable housing
- Employment (including hourly wage of current employment)
- Parenthood
- Educational attainment (type)
- Receipt of public assistance

It is hypothesized that the majority of youth would be in stable housing, less than 50% would be parents by age 25, 60% would have achieved their GED or high school diploma, and less than 25% would be receiving public assistance at follow-up. These hypothesized outcomes are based on the past longitudinal research on youth aging out of foster care (see Courtney et al., 2011).

3.3. Sample

Youth who lived in the RAFA housing program between 2007 and 2015 were eligible for this study. All of the youth contacted for this study had exited the housing program at the time of interview. The majority of the study participants were Non-Minor Dependents (NMDs), which means they were able to stay in foster care in Alameda County until their 21st birthday, and chose to do so. That is, they were either NMDs in the past, or were currently NMDs at the time of the interview, but no longer living in RAFA housing. The other youth who lived in RAFA were young people who lived in the program between the ages of 16 and 18 years old, before AB 12 was passed in California in 2012. Youth who live in RAFA between 16 and 17 years of age are living in the THPP program of RAFA and those that are 18 to 20 are in the THP-Plus FC program. See Table 1 for a description of the sample.

3.4. Data collection

The survey tool was constructed in part, based on data gathered in the Midwest Study (see Courtney et al., 2011) where outcomes related to housing, educational, employment, wages, public assistance, parenting, incarceration, etc. were explored. The survey for this study was administered during phone interviews with study participants. Participants who completed the survey gave their consent to participate anonymously in the research study and were fully informed of the voluntary nature and purpose of the study by the interviewer (Neal, 2017, p. 243). Participants received a $50 Target gift card for participation in the study. The survey was not tested for reliability or validity.

In order to contact participants, the researchers used social media

### Table 1

Demographics of samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RAFA study (2016), n = 55</th>
<th>CA THP Plus-FC* (2017), n = 427</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follow up time:</td>
<td>1-8 yrs</td>
<td>At exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>22.3 years</td>
<td>Between 18 and 21 (unk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time in</td>
<td>9.08 years (SD 5.64 yrs)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foster care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>65% 35%</td>
<td>58% 42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Minor Dependent</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(NMD) status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular foster care</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>status</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
(primarily Facebook), as well as emails and phone numbers given at the time of the youth’s exit interview, to contact past young people who lived in the program. Fifty-five (55) youth responded to the outreach, from a total of 150 eligible youth. The response rate was 37%, which is low compared to other former foster youth studies. However, given the transient nature of former foster care youth, and the fact that some youth resided in the program up to eight years earlier (and did not know they would be contacted almost a decade later), this response rate is acceptable.

4. Results

The sample was a total of 55 current and former foster youth who lived in the RAFA program sometime between 2007 and 2015. The mean age of the participants at the time of survey was 22.3 years old, with a span of age between 18 and 27 years old. The sample came from a total population of 155 youth served in the program during that time and all had exited the program for at least one year. The mean length of time the sample spent in foster care was just over 9 years. The sample consisted of 65% females which is similar to the percentage of females residing in California’s THP-Plus and THP + FC programs – around 60% (see John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2017). It is unknown how long the youth in the study have been out of care as past data was not collected on this.

The outcomes of the participants in this study were overall quite positive. The youth had high rates of current stable housing (96% vs 4% who were currently housed in homeless shelters), which is important as some of youth had exited the RAFA program as long as eight years earlier. Stable housing outcomes included subgroups such as youth living in their own, or shared, apartments, living in other transitional housing programs (e.g., in California former foster youth can reside in THP-Plus housing until their 25th birthday), and residing in college dorms. “Living on their own” is the same outcome used in the Midwest study (Courtney et al., 2011), which includes all subgroups as this study. Since most states now offer these young people transitional housing options up until age 25 (in California it is THP Plus housing), it is not surprising that some youth left RAFA and moved into housing with a THP Plus provider. It is important to note, however, that 44% of the respondents reported being without housing for some period of time since exiting the RAFA program.

Fifty-eight percent of the sample were enrolled in 2-year colleges and 4-year universities at the time of follow-up, which is higher than most studies of former foster care youth (see Valentine et al., 2015; John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2017). Lastly, the sample had higher rates of current employment of at least 30 h per week, when compared to youth in the Youth Villages Study and the THP + FC Study. In addition, participants reported a mean hourly wage ($15.69) above the living wage threshold for the nearby city of San Leandro ($10.00) (see Table 2). Yet, since 41% of females and 16% of males were parents at the time of data collection, $15.69 wage is below what is needed to sustain a family of more than one individual. Also, with the average monthly rent in Alameda County hovering at $2099 (in 2016) for a 2-bedroom apartment, this hourly wage is unfortunately still not adequate for a shared housing situation in the county (Rentcafe.com, 2018).

The outcomes of this study were then compared to two other studies: 1) California THP + Foster Care 2017 Annual Report and 2) the large Youth Villages study from 2015 (see Valentine et al., 2015). The THP + FC 2017 Annual Report is similar to this study as it examined youth after living in THP + FC transitional housing program at exit. The youth in the THP + FC study resided in the program between April 2016 and March 2017. The youth were surveyed at exit and responses were based on self-report.

Similarly, the Youth Villages study sample is used as a comparison group because older foster youth were served in a transitional living program and outcomes were evaluated using a randomized control group. Participants had lived in the Youth Villages program for at least one year when outcome survey data was collected. Outcomes indicate that RAFA programming achieves some improved outcomes for foster youth in comparison to the THP + FC and Youth Villages studies. Findings also make it evident that additional supports and services are needed to ensure transitional-aged foster youth can meet the challenges they face and achieve life goals.

5. Discussion

Research has shown that older and former foster youth struggle with many different challenges including poverty, substance use, mental health issues, unemployment, and early pregnancy to name a few. In the absence of an adequate supply of affordable, quality housing units, especially in expensive places like the San Francisco Bay Area, youth can experience difficulty with successfully transitioning to adulthood. Successful supportive housing programs may offer these young people the opportunity of stable housing, while paying minimal or no rent, to save money and to develop daily living and employment skills. Youth can also complete their high school diplomas or pursue post-secondary education while living in such transitional housing programs. Unfortunately, most transitional housing programs for older foster youth often are unaware of the general outcomes of the youth at exit, and even less so many years later.

This cross-sectional study design does have some limitations. First, this non-random sample affects the degree to which these results can be generalized (e.g., there may have been self-selection bias as the youth voluntarily chose to live in RAFA). The small sample size does not provide adequate statistical power to reliably identify small between-group differences in youth responses (Courtney et al., 2016, p. 21). Also, the reason youth were placed in foster care, as well as the number and types of placements in foster care are not known. Another limitation was that length of time of living in the RAFA program was not able to be collected from the program. The youth may have been able to guess how long they lived in the RAFA program, but recollecting this information after five to eight years for some of the participants may have been difficult. A lack of a clear comparison group is another limitation to this study.

Although the survey tool was developed, in part, from parts of the Midwest study, it was not tested for reliability or statistical validity. Also, another limitation is that this study has a relatively low response rate (35%). However, it is important to note that some of the population lived in RAFA before personal email was common and/or made permanent by the youth (i.e., they didn’t change email addresses frequently). In addition, contact data is usually not collected by transitional living programs because they often do not follow youth years after leaving the program (Dworsky and Dion, 2014, p. 3). In addition, a final limitation of this study is related to data collection being self-report in nature. Due to possible bias related to social desirability, responses may have been exaggerated or inaccurate.

In spite of the limitations, this study adds to the current research examining the outcomes of older current and former foster youth that access transitional living programs that are developed to assist them with the move to adulthood (see Mallon, 1998; Rashid, 2004). One study in particular examined some outcomes for youth after leaving foster care and compared youth in transitional housing to youth who had other housing alternatives (Jones, 2011). This study found that the youth in transitional housing had more housing stability, were less likely to be unemployed, used substances less, and had less criminal contact. However, they did not examine future parenting or use of public assistance. Given the lack of empirical outcome studies examining housing services for transitional aged foster youth, it is imperative programs begin to look at their long-term outcomes.
Unfortunately, youth in foster care are often not exposed to the types of informal life skills learning experiences that families typically provide (Dworsky et al., 2012, p. 11). Yet, transitional housing programs can be helpful to foster youth as they move into adulthood. RAFA’s model of comprehensive services, scattered-site housing, and in vivo practice opportunities can support current, older foster youth with learning new skills which can help them maintain housing and employment, and pursue educational goals. Programs with models that include case management staff, therapists, and resident advisors can offer the breadth of services these young people often need due to their trauma histories, mental health needs, and lack of independent living skills (see Courtney and Heuring, 2005; Kramer et al., 2013). When compared with other similar studies, the RAFA model illustrates it can be effective with long term employment outcomes, hourly wage outcomes, and post-secondary educational enrollment outcomes.

This wrap-around model of service with comprehensive support and guidance related to all aspects of independent living in a real world environment (e.g., budgeting, cooking, paying bills, and mental health/well-being) is what these young people need. They can learn what they need to make the transition to adulthood a smoother process than other similar studies, the RAFA model illustrates it can be effective with long term employment outcomes, hourly wage outcomes, and post-secondary educational enrollment outcomes.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing situation</th>
<th>RAFA study (2016), n = 55 Mean Age: 22.3</th>
<th>Follow up time: 1-8 yrs</th>
<th>Youth villages study (2015), n = 659 Follow up time: After 1 year in program</th>
<th>CA THP Plus-FC* (2017), n = 427, Age: bet 18-21 yrs Follow up time: At exit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own place</td>
<td>53 (96%)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless shelter/Incarcerated</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting (lifetime)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current receipt of public assistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food stamps</td>
<td>16 (29%)</td>
<td>378 (57.4%)</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIC</td>
<td>7 (13%)</td>
<td>112 (17%)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma/GED</td>
<td>40 (72%)</td>
<td>472 (71.6%)</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary education</td>
<td>32 (58%)</td>
<td>132 (18.9%)</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>86% (n = 40) of those not enrolled in full-time college</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average employment wages</td>
<td>$15.69 per hour</td>
<td></td>
<td>$11.52 per hour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Adjusted from 2015 to 2017 for inflation.

6. Conclusion


